

Where Do I Start?

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Anytime someone starts with a new livestock project, there are a number of issues that must be addressed. I personally believe that it is important to study any new project before you begin. I encourage all young people and their families to go and watch a goat show or two before diving in head first. Ask questions, talk to people who have been involved in the program. There is no better teacher than someone who has first hand experience in a project. I also encourage new project participants to go and visit breeders and other project participants to see how their operations are set up and how they manage their animals. Visiting, seeing with your own eyes, and asking questions can eliminate a lot of heartache and headaches when starting a new project. A wise man once told me there are no stupid questions; stupidity only exists when we fail to ask questions.

So let's assume we have done some visiting and have received enough information to convince us that perhaps showing market goats is a possible project for us—what do we do next? The first thing I recommend is that you evaluate your existing facilities. Where are your goats going to live? Fortunately, goats do not require a lot of space. Obviously, the more room a goat has the less forced exercise that will be required. I have seen set-ups where the goats are penned in long runs, are fed at one end and watered at the other, thus forcing the goats to exercise on their own. I have also seen facilities in which the animals were in individual six feet by six feet pens. In this situation, the owners had to get the animals out every day and exercise them. Exercise is probably a good idea in any pen arrangement. However, this is a topic for another fact sheet. Either of these situations will work, depending on how much time you are willing to dedicate to your project.

Regardless of your situation, there are a number of MUSTS that have to be addressed with your facility. I have seen a number of pens that were built woven wire fencing. This is fine UNLESS, you goats have horns. If this is the situation, then you will spend a lot of time removing your goats' heads from the fence. Many people use hog type panels with the small holes so the goats can not get their heads stuck. You should also realize that goats are quite obviously related cats and can crawl through holes that are much smaller than the goat appears to be.

Shade is also very important. Although Boer goats were developed in a rather warm, humid environment, it is mandatory to provide some sort of protection from the sun. Not only can a fresh clipped goat get sunburned, but no animal will perform well when forced to lie out in the sweltering heat. Most people also provide some sort of cooling fans. Keeping your goats cool will aid in getting your project animals to consistently eat in the heat of summer. I have also seen problems arise with "shelterless" goats becoming chilled after a rain when they are not provided some means of protection from the elements.

A shelter of some nature is also important to keep the animals water at a drinkable temperature. Do you set your glass of water out on the front porch and let it get hot in the sun before YOU drink it? I think not! Do not force your project animal to do this either. Speaking of watering your animals, make sure you have some means to provide a CLEAN, fresh, CLEAN, cool, and CLEAN source of water for your animals. I get phone calls all the time from people who say their animals are not eating well or that they are not gaining weight like they should. After a quick farm visit, I often find

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dirty, stagnant water buckets. My theory is really simple—if you will not drink it, do not expect your animals to drink it! WARNING!—goats also seem to think a water bucket is a target with a bulls-eye for the deposition of their smart pills, if you know what I mean.

I also encourage all goat exhibitors to feed their animals from sort of trough that is placed at shoulder height. Goats are browsing animals and do not like to eat at ground level. The trough should be cleaned before every feeding, because goats often utilize their troughs as pill targets also. Goats also have a bad habit of trying to stand in their troughs, so any feeding trough needs to be situated or protected where they can not participate in this vice. Hay feeding troughs are also necessary in your goat pens. One of the most unique feeders I have seen consists of a hay basket or hay net being suspended from the ceiling in a goat pen forcing the goats to stand on their rear legs to eat their hay. This is an activity that is seen quite regularly when goats on pasture try to eat leaves from the bottom limbs on our trees at home. You can also just simply use some type of hay manger arrangement much like those that are commercially available from most livestock equipment dealers. I have a number of these at home that have both been purchased or home-made and both work equally effectively. Regardless of the hay feeding system you use, be sure that you have the gaps in your racks are small enough to prevent your animals from getting their heads stuck. As far as the rest of the pen is concerned, it is critical to keep the pen clean and well-bedded so you can keep your goat healthy, clean and free from stains.

Goats are very playful animals that enjoy climbing on things. Many goat fitters have platform, reels or other objects in their pens to allow the goats to climb and get some exercise on their own. This also aids in the reduction of boredom for your project animals.

There is an infinite number of possibilities that exist in setting up your goat fitting barn, but keeping some of these suggestions in mind will allow you to have a more easily managed, EXHIBITOR FRIENDLY goat project.