



Angora Goats are a Good Choice for Hobby Farmers

Angora goats are not only beautiful to the eye, but as fiber goats, they're valuable to the touch. Kept under ideal conditions, these goats' durable and soft mohair is money in the bank.

By Sara Bewley

Soon after birth however these living stuffed toys become luxury fiber-producing machines, yielding 20 to 25 percent of their body weight each year in soft, durable mohair.

This high level of production makes Angora goats the most efficient fiber-producing animal in the world and an intriguing option for today's hobby farmer.

"Angoras fit perfectly into our lives," says Sue Ann Nissen, a 20-year veteran of raising Angora goats in Marshall, N.C. "They are fairly gentle and their size and temperament allow women and children to work easily with them." Nissen cites personality, straightforward maintenance and diversified income sources as compelling reasons for hobby farmers to take a second look at these fuzzy, captivating creatures.

History of Angora Goats

"I was drawn to these creatures through a desire to utilize their wonderful fiber," says Diane Coon, an Angora goat breeder in Hamilton, Mont. "Spinning goats' hair is an ancient art even mentioned in the Bible."

Angora Goats originated in Asia Minor and early references in Sumerian cuneiform tablets and the Bible date the origin of the breed to somewhere between the 12th and 15th centuries B.C. In time, the breed became well established near Ankara, Turkey, from which the name "Angora" is derived.

The word "Mohair" is derived from the Arabic "mukhaya" which means "to choose or prefer." In the 15th and 16th centuries, mohair fabrics began to reach markets in Europe. Demand soon outstripped supply and the Sultan of Turkey placed an embargo on the export of raw mohair.

In 1838, the first successful importation of purebred Angora goats established the breed in South Africa. Eleven years later, in 1849, the first Angora goats were imported into the United States, having been received by Dr. James B. Davis of South Carolina as a thank-you gift from the Sultan of Turkey for his assistance in experimental cotton production in that country.

Today, South Africa and the United States remain the two largest mohair producers, with smaller populations of goats being found in Turkey, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain.

Dying Angora Goat Fiber

The main product of Angora goats is their mohair fiber (not to be confused with Angora fiber, which is produced from rabbits).

An Angora goat's fleece grows at a rate of one inch per month and they are shorn twice per year, typically in the spring and fall. Each goat yields an average of five to 10 pounds of mohair at each shearing.

The fiber from the youngest goats is the finest and most valuable because an Angora's fleece continually coarsens with age.

"Mohair has strength and durability unmatched by wool, and as a dyer and fiber artist, the beauty of the dyed yarn is second only to silk," says yarn designer Sherry Brooks.

Brooks, and her husband Randall, manage a flock of 100 colored Angoras on their farm in Lancaster, Texas. Fiber from their goats, along with purchased white kid mohair, makes the basis of their upscale hand-dyed yarn line, which is marketed at fiber festivals across the country. "Mohair's affinity for dye produces colors with clarity and luster that makes it unique when used alone or blended with other fiber," she says. This luster and brilliance gives mohair its common moniker as "The Diamond Fiber."

In addition to its ability to be dyed a vibrant array of colors, mohair is strong and durable with a tensile strength for its fiber



diameter that rivals steel.

Yet mohair garments pack in less space than similar wool garments. Elasticity of the fibers helps garments made of mohair resist wrinkling. Essentially non-flammable, mohair is also a popular choice for upholstery fabrics.

For the hobby farmer, a little ingenuity with the fiber can yield sound profits to the farm's bottom line.

"The more you put into the fiber, the more you will profit," says Coon.

"Think of it this way ... if you sell one pound of mohair to the commercial market, you may receive \$3 for that pound; if you wash it and card it for spinners, you can bump that up to \$40 a pound. If you spin that carded fiber into yarn, you can sell that pound for anywhere from \$80 to \$150 dollars; or, if you take that yarn and knit a sweater or shawl, you can bump that pound up to \$300 to \$500."

Coon markets all of her fiber as spinning fiber or as finished garments.

Angora Goats Have Many Colors

To satisfy the requirements of the textile industry for a fiber that will take dye in a uniform manner, Angora goats in the United States have traditionally been selected for a pure white fleece.

Mohair buyers at the large Texas wool warehouses that handle this country's commercial mohair clip will not accept colored hair, but this has not deterred the hobby-farm-driven development of colored varieties.

At different points in history Angoras have been crossed to domestic goats of various colors to increase the population of mohair-producing goats. Thanks to this mixed background from hundreds of years ago, occasionally a colored "throwback" will pop up in otherwise all white purebred flocks. Breeder interest in these colored animals has led to the cultivation of colored Angora goats in a wide variety of shades.

From black to brown to red, the fiber from these colorful goats satisfies a niche market demand for naturally colored fibers that do not require dyes. This niche demand helps breeders command premium prices for both breeding stock (\$300 to \$600 per head) and fiber (\$10 to \$24/lb.) and compete favorably with other niche livestock options, like alpacas.

While Coon has both white and colored Angoras, the colored animals hold special appeal for her. "They are tremendous animals that exhibit wonderful variety," she explains. Keep goats dry for 24 hours prior to shearing. Shear youngest goats first and oldest goats last to prevent coarser fiber from becoming mixed with finer, higher-value hair. Keep the shearing area clean. A plywood platform works well, especially if swept between age or color groups. Communicate with your shearer. Let him know that you don't mind a slower pace as long as the animals are treated gently and there is a minimum of second cuts (short cuts that downgrade the value of the fleece). Remove stained or soiled hair from the clip before storing the fleece.

Breeding Angora Goats

Angoras breed seasonally, usually from August through January. Does are induced into estrus by the presence of a buck and cycle every 19 to 21 days until pregnant. Artificial insemination in Angoras is not common, so most breeding is done by a live buck that runs with the doe herd for the two or three months of breeding season.

Recommended pre-breeding management of the doe flock includes shearing, delousing and increasing the plane of nutrition several weeks in advance of breeding. Supplementing the diet with additional feed in the weeks preceding breeding, a process called flushing, encourages multiple births. In some herds, twin births are very common, in other flocks, single births will predominate. The two largest factors influencing multiple births in Angora goats are pre-breeding nutrition and body size. Larger, stouter nannies that have been flushed prior to breeding are more likely to have twin births than those that are smaller bodied or that have not been flushed prior to breeding.

"Your does can live to be 16 and still be productive at 12, 13 and even 14 years old," says Coon. "That is why good conformation is such an essential trait along with beautiful fiber." Generally, nannies need to weigh 60 pounds to breed, which means most females are bred as yearlings and kid for the first time as 2-year-old goats.

Kidding Issues with Angoras

"Angoras have few breeding or kidding problems," says registered white Angora goat breeder Sue Ann Nissen.



Newborn kids are delicate, however, especially in cold weather and can chill easily in temperatures below 40 degrees F if they do not nurse quickly after birth. Breeders who show early in the year and those in milder climates generally kid in the early winter months (January through March). Many hobby breeders prefer to forgo harsh winter weather for a later kidding. "April kidding has worked well, giving us healthy robust kids," says Nissen, who compensates for her late spring kidding by showing her goats later in the year.

Angoras are raised by their dams and weaned at three to four months of age. Providing a creep area where the kids can eat without competition from adults helps to increase the kids' rate of growth and most breeders include a coccidiostat in the kid ration to prevent coccidiosis (a parasite common to goats).

After weaning and shearing breeders begin evaluating the kid crop, a process that usually continues through until the spring of the goat's yearling year. If kids do not show breeding or show-stock potential, breeders can market these animals for meat or keep them for fiber production.

Showing Angoras

Angoras are show-ring naturals, being friendly, reasonable in size and requiring very little show preparation. Unlike sheep, you do not wash or trim an Angora's hair before entering the show-ring (a process called fitting). In fact, trimming hair, washing the goat or adding products to the mohair can get you quickly disqualified at most shows.

This easy show preparation makes the breed a popular choice at specialty fiber festivals around the country and at county and state fairs in Angora-populous regions. These same traits also make them a popular 4-H project. "They're more like pets when they are handled," says Roy Sanders, a breeder and president of the Texas Angora Goat Raiser's Association, from Harper, Texas. "Children like playing with them because they are so soft and cute," he says. That, coupled with several significant scholarship programs in his area make them a popular youth option.

The breed's natural affinity for the show-ring also provides an excellent marketing avenue for breeders. The demand for show goats is strong says Sanders. "Show quality goats are where the profit is for selling breeding stock."

Starting Your Own Angora Flock

Nissen advises beginners interested in Angoras to find the right breeder and ask lots of questions. "From that person you will get all the help you need. Share your ideas and information with that person. The amount of land you have will be important, your personal schedules, fencing requirements, housing for the goats, et cetera. Your own situation and goals will establish how you start with Angoras," she says.

Sanders concurs, and emphasizes the importance of quality over quantity when starting a flock. "Get some high-quality goats to start with, maybe two or three does and a really good buck. It may not be the quantity you wanted, but spend the same money on better quality so that when you get your numbers up you can use what you have and avoid heavy culling to improve."

Ease of day-to-day management, strong demand and creative marketing options make Angoras a popular and potentially lucrative hobby-farming option. However, most small farmers like Nissen are simply drawn to them out of a deep appreciation of the striking elegance of the breed as a whole. "There are few other sights as beautiful as seeing a small flock of Angoras out in the meadow," she says.

About the Author

Sara Bewley raises white and colored Angora goats on her farm, Hill Shepherd, in Killbuck, Ohio.

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