



Belted Beauties: Belted Galloway Cattle

With its weather-resistant coat and charming coloration, the Belted Galloway is a tough, adaptable breed that thrives on small farms.

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All-season Cattle

Wisconsin, where winter temperatures plunge to 30 degrees F below zero and the average yearly snowfall varies from 30 to more than 100 inches across the state, demands that its inhabitants be hardy, especially those living outdoors year-round.

So when Michael Caldwell, MD, PhD, and his wife, Lorna, started thinking about raising organic, grassfed cattle on their Milladore, Wis., farm, they looked for a breed capable of weathering the rough winters without batting an eyelash.

Enter the Belted Galloway, with a dense, double coat—both beautiful and functional—consisting of a shaggy, weather-resistant outer layer and soft, insulating undercoat.

“Belties are so well insulated that when it snows, the snow on their backs doesn’t melt,” says Lorna. “We have a shelter for ours, but they prefer to take shelter in the woods; they don’t like being inside.”

Coastal Maine’s harsh winters pose no problem for the Aldermere’s Belties, either.

“While we have buildings and shelters where our young stock or pre-calving cows have access, they’re perfectly suited to doing well in the open,” explains Howard. “We just make sure they have a sheltered area away from the wind to rest and give them plenty of fresh water and hay throughout winter.”

Indeed, Scotland’s capricious climate has created an adaptable breed capable of toughing out all kinds of weather and difficult conditions, from torrential rains to sweltering summers. (They love a pond to cool off in, though.)

“Belties are unique in that they can do well even in hotter climates, as they won’t carry their extra hair through warmer weather,” Howard says.

Belted Galloways are Survivors

The moderately sized Belted Galloways have retained many of the survival traits bred out of the larger, more traditional cattle breeds, he stresses.

For example, long-lived Belties generally show good resistance to diseases, and the cows tend to have an easy time come calving season. Thanks to the probable Dutch Belted dairy influence, Beltie cows are excellent milkers whose calves thrive on their rich, high-butterfat milk.

“Over the years, I’ve only had to pull maybe five calves,” Faul says. “And Belties are definitely good mothers—they’ll even run coyotes off.”

Beltie enthusiasts also praise these cattle as efficient grazers and feed converters (they’ll eat plants other cattle spurn, Howard notes), a trait that makes them an excellent choice for grass-based operations like the one at Caldwell Farms.

“We don’t feed our cattle grain at all,” Michael explains. “We use management-intensive grazing, and in the wintertime, we feed them haylage [fermented alfalfa, clovers and grasses], which we harvest during the summer and store in our silos.”

“The organic inspector couldn’t believe that these plump animals are getting no extra feedings of grain, they look so good,” Lorna adds. “It boils down to their genetics and being fed good-quality grass.”

The Beef on Belties

While many Beltie owners opt to keep these cattle as pasture ornaments or focus on preservation efforts, an increasing number of breeders raise them for what they were developed for so long ago in Scotland: beef production.

“Twenty years ago, people wouldn’t have considered putting one of their Belties in the freezer, but this breed lends itself



extremely well to grassfed operations,” says Faul. And what about that beef? “It’s definitely good meat: lean and very flavorful, with a darker color than commercial beef.”

Protected by their weatherproof coats, Belties don’t need to lay down much back fat to stay warm during winter.

This translates to more beef—properly finished, Galloways and their crosses dress out at 60 to 62 percent of their live weight—and a meat product low in total fat as well as saturated fat, yet still juicy and packed with flavor.

For the Caldwelles, Michael’s background in the medical field made it only natural that they would raise their Belties organically and humanely on pasture rather than use confinement methods favored by commercial beef producers.

With more consumers today concerned about the treatment of livestock and the safety of our food in light of E. coli scares and bacterial resistance to antibiotics, it also made good business sense for them to take this path. Right now, beef and other meat products are the fastest-growing segments of the organic-foods industry.

Organic farming, however, takes hard work and dedication; easy fixes like hormones to boost cattle growth or synthetic fertilizers to create lush pastures aren’t an option.

For instance, producing USDA-certified organic beef requires that the Caldwelles tend the land where their Belted Galloways graze while keeping environmental sustainability in mind, shunning synthetic pesticides, fertilizers and other potentially hazardous agrichemicals.

Also, the cattle cannot receive any antibiotics or hormones during their entire lives. If one of their bovines becomes ill and requires antibiotics, the couple must pull it from organic production for treatment and finish raising the animal for sale as “natural” beef.

All of this demands documentation, including detailed records of each animal’s life history, plus the yearly inspection to maintain their certification.

Belties are Worth It

It’s clear the Caldwelles believe the extra work is worth it and that their hearty, efficient Belted Galloways have been a gift to them, their organic farm and their customers.

“Our feeling is that we want to be comfortable with the products we sell,” says Michael. “We want to give our customers the best quality and the healthiest meat products. I couldn’t imagine raising feedlot cattle.”

If you don’t mind getting questions like “Why do you put those sheets on them every day?” or “How do you paint the white stripes around them?” you might want to consider adding these belted beauties to your hobby farm.

According to Howard, given regular handling, these medium-sized cattle are easy to work with, and they make great projects for kids to show (he does warn they can be skittish if left on their own).

Surprisingly, raisers often find Beltie bulls friendlier and calmer than the cows!

“The Belted Galloways are self promoters in that people are automatically drawn to them,” says Howard, who grew up from second grade onward at Aldermere while his father, Dwight Howard, worked as farm manager helping the Chatfields conserve this breed.

By the way, after he graduated from high school, Howard vowed he would never have anything to do with farming again, but by now you know how Belties are: Eight years ago, they called him back to the farm.

“Because these cattle are so distinctive and the quality of their meat is so consistently high, they’re perfect for the hobby farmer who wants beautiful, self-sufficient animals that can be easily marketed for their beef on a local scale,” Howard continues.

“I’ve sold some to farms that don’t even sell beef; they may just have a farm stand and want some Belties in the field to attract customers; they’re a traffic-stopper. If you were to design a marketing plan and a cow for your logo to attract customers, it would have to be the Belted Galloway.”

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