

To Be Or Not To Be a Livestock Owner

You want to get started stocking your hobby farm with animals, but which species? Read on to decipher what livestock is profitable, compatible and easy—or difficult—to care for.

by Sue Weaver

Confessions of a Livestock Junkie

Sue gives a little history as to how she became a livestock addict.

I have always been a horse obsessive. My mother swore to her dying day that my very first word was “horsie.”

When my little friends cut out paper dolls, I snipped pictures of horses from the newspaper and taped them to my bedroom walls. I galloped when others skipped. My teachers forbade me to write one more essay about, or draw one more picture of horses.

It couldn't be helped. I was possessed. By the time I was 12, I'd salted back enough babysitting, blackberry picking, and yard-raking money to buy my first horse.

Since that day there have been horses. Always horses. Yet, animal-crazed child that I was, I dreamed of owning lots more livestock pets. A cow. Sheep. Goats! It didn't happen.

In 1977, when I'd reached the ripe old age of 30, husband John and I pulled up our Hoosier stakes and headed for Minnesota's lovely Northwoods.

We would live off the land—garden, hunt, raise our own meat! And we'd start with chickens.

I fired off an order to a mail-order hatchery and a week later we unpacked our box of peeping fluffballs: a special cockerel assortment, one of this, two of that, and as our flock of rowdy young roosters matured, we could tell them apart.

We named them, enjoyed their charming antics, and when butchering time arrived, managed to slaughter four of our roos before giving the rest away to be dispatched by someone to whom they weren't family pets. Shortly thereafter we became vegetarians/

The clock kept ticking and years raced by.

We pulled up roots once again and resettled in the sunny Ozarks with our dogs and happy herd of equine rescues and Curly horses. And with (finally!) space to expand, a wee group of chubby Miniature horses soon materialized. And Guineas, because we both like them.

Then it happened. On that fateful January afternoon I set out for our rural mailbox to collect a magazine that would change my life forever.

As I feasted my eyes on the handsome Highland cattle gracing Hobby Farms' January/March 2003 cover, I knew I'd finally JUST DO IT—I'd buy the Highland calf I've fancied for a lifetime.

I'm a writer, I rationalized, I write about farm animals, so surely we should keep livestock pets...

Frazer, my bonny bovine buddy joined us in April, with chickens and more Guineas hot on his heels.

And what's a farm without goats? Enter Tunia, a winsome Pygmy princess and Eamon, her brawny Boer-Nubian sidekick.

Then pet sheep: Dodger and Angel. Soon ... more sheep!

And so it goes. I'm Sue Weaver and I am a livestock junkie.

Top A farm without livestock? Unthinkable!

A flock of happy chickens, pigs to take to market, a freezer steer—they're part of most city dwellers' escape-to-the-good-life plan.

Meanwhile, established hobby farmers dream of raising ... something, some profitable, mortgage-lifting bird or beast. But what?

There are countless hobby-farm livestock options to choose from, but which (if any) are right for you? Here we compare some traditional barnyard favorites and a select group of alternative animals, too. Perhaps we can help you choose.

Livestock -- Or Not

Before launching any animal-related enterprise, be certain you accept its demands. Not everyone is cut out to keep livestock. Before jumping into a livestock venture, ask yourself: Are you willing to be on call 24/7, 365 days a year, when your livestock need you? Will you dutifully camp in the barn when foals are due? Roll out of bed at 2 a.m. to feed a bottle lamb? Retrieve escaped cattle and patch their flattened fences under a sizzling noonday sun, missing that long-anticipated televised ball game or NASCAR racing in the process? Animals rarely get hungry, sick, loose or injured at convenient times. Is reliable relief help available when you need it? If not, would you forego dinner invitations, overnight trips, and well-deserved vacations? Keeping livestock invariably ties you down.

Can you weather the inevitable livestock keeper's lows? When your favorite broodmare shatters her leg or a weasel slaughters a slew of your prized chickens, what then? Animals die. They injure themselves and each other. Things go wrong. Some stock keepers neatly handle these stressors—could you?

If keeping livestock for profit, are you capable of selling the animals? Can you send the steer to slaughter, could you sell the foal you love? Are you willing to pull out the stops to market your wares? To continually monitor market trends and stay on the cutting edge? To advertise? Maintain a website? To haul your birds or animals to expos, demonstrations, shows and sales? If not, think "pets," not "produce." Don't become a breeder.

Are there enough pennies in your purse to support your animals when things go awry? Markets falter. Disease rips through your herd. Expect the unexpected. Keeping livestock can be a pricey proposition. Have you the financial resources to see yours through those bumpy times?

Will the animals be pets? Freezer fodder? A means of producing offspring to raise or to sell? If you keep livestock to claim a lower cost agriculture land tax assessment, your venture must eventually turn a profit. How much profit is enough? And would you be content if you lost money or your animals simply paid their way?

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More Basic Livestock Owner Requirements

One animal or 100, you should genuinely enjoy working with the species you select. And you must also like the people associated with it—buying, selling, co-op marketing, or showing, you'll be dealing with them on an ongoing basis.

Also make sure the species you choose is suited to your climate, your temperament and your physical capabilities.

You could breed yak in South Texas and hair sheep in northern Minnesota—but why? Panting yak and shivering sheep are unhappy campers. Choose something adapted for the weather where you live.

Loud, abrupt, or timid individuals rarely resonate with flighty, reactive birds and beasts. "Do-it-my-way-or-else" humans and headstrong, aggressive animals are bound to clash.

Assess your mind-set carefully and choose a compatible species. It'll save a heap of upset for all concerned.

Interacting with many animal species requires considerable brawn. Don't take on a bird or beast you physically can't handle. It'll be frustrating and dangerous if you do.

Make certain your facilities are adequate.

If they aren't, do you have enough land, financial resources, and know-how to make the necessary improvements? Can you obtain the building permits to do it?

If you need chutes and squeezes, raceways, or seven-foot bull-tight fences, build them or choose a different species. Factoring in injuries, losses and breakouts, it's the safe and economical thing to do.

Before purchasing alternative livestock, acquire any licenses and owner/breeder permits required by federal, state and local authorities and make certain your property is zoned for the sort of livestock you plan to keep.

Discuss your venture with area veterinarians. Are they qualified to treat bison, alpacas, deer, or whatever else you've chosen? Do they want to? If not, are you willing (and able) to transport sick or injured animals to a specialty practice and to learn to perform routine maintenance procedures yourself?

And if your venture is to be self-sustaining, you must market the commodity you produce. Make certain you know your target species to the "Nth" degree. Visit successful breeders and producers and ask a world of questions. Subscribe to periodicals, read books, conduct online research. Meet with county agricultural extension agents, consult with experts at your state veterinary college.

Don't charge into any livestock enterprise on the basis of hearsay; you must educate yourself to perfection before you buy.

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What to Know About Commercial Livestock

Ask a host of established hobby farmers and most will agree, there is little (if any) money to be made in commercial livestock.

Feeder cattle, market hog and standard lamb-and-wool operations are faltering. Yet there are ways you can turn a profit raising farmyard standbys: by niche marketing your merchandise (such as goat kids or lambs raised to meet the needs of a specific ethnic community) and by marketing value-added products in lieu of the usual kind (sheep or goat cheese or yogurt, organic beef or pork, eggs from free-range chickens).

To get the inside skinny on marketing your product, contact ATTRA or consult any of these fine resources:

Making Your Small Farm Profitable, by Ron Macher (Storey Books; 1999)

Texas A&M Factsheet: Niche Marketing
<http://trmep.tamu.edu/cg/factsheets/rm1-2.html>

Agriculture & Natural Resources; Value Added Products
www.newfarm.osu.edu/management/value.html

A Look at Livestock Choices
Here's a run-down on some of the most popular livestock for hobby farmers.

Cattle

Commercial beef prices skyrocketed in 2003 and are expected to hold steady through spring. However, more sustainably profitable cattle ventures include marketing specialty beef—certified organic, natural, grass or corn fed—and raising rare breed or miniature cattle.

Beef cattle are a fine choice for hobby farmers. They're low maintenance, don't require fancy digs, and specialty beef is in vogue. Most folks can manage cattle with a minimum of fuss and local veterinarians can generally treat their ills.

Sustainable Beef Production
www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/beefprod.html

Raising Beef on a Few Acres
www.ext.usu.edu/publica/agpubs/ag505.pdf

Organic Beef Main Information Page
www.agmrc.org/beef/orgbeefmain.html

Chickens

Chickens are part and parcel of the rural experience. They demand little beyond a safe place to sleep, feed, water, and a few hours of your time each week spent egg gathering and cleaning their quarters. In trade you get eggs and table meat.

It's a good deal!

Organic, natural, and free-range chicken and eggs are health-conscious buyers' first choices. Tack a sign to your mailbox or market through your local natural foods co-op. Larger-scale ventures can investigate commercial niche marketing. However you cut it, chickens have a place on every farm.

Agricultural Alternatives: Small-Scale Egg Production
<http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/FreePubs/pdfs/ua335.pdf>

Profitable Poultry; Raising Birds on Pasture
www.sare.org/bulletin/poultry/poultry.pdf

Organic Poultry Main Information Page
www.agmrc.org/poultry/orgpmain.html

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Goats

According to Florida A&M University's publication, Markets for Meat Goats, 70 percent of the world's population regularly dines on goat meat.

As ethnic communities in North America continue to expand, so does the demand for quality goat meat.

To answer that demand, roughly 327,000 goat carcasses are imported to the United States each year. In 1999, 492,000 domestic goats were slaughtered at federally inspected meat plants and another 300,000 at state inspected or informal facilities.

Meat goats are today's most promising livestock; the demand for goats raised and slaughtered to ethnic specifications vastly exceeds the foreseeable domestic supply.

Viable goat ventures for those opposed to slaughter include dairying, marketing artisan quality goat milk cheese, producing high-end Angora and Cashmere fleece for handspinners, and raising dairy, meat, or fiber goat breeding stock.

Sustainable Goat Production; An Overview
www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/goatoverview.html

Dairy Goats
www.mda.state.mn.us/mgo/livestock/Dairy_Goats.htm

Agricultural Alternatives; Meat Goat Production
<http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/FreePubs/pdfs/ua340.pdf>

Meat Goat Resources
www.mgo.umn.edu/livestock/Meat%20Goats.htm

Horses

While many folks dream of raising horses, in reality few horse breeders manage to turn a consistent profit.

Nevertheless, there are always a few "hot" breeds in which money can be made. Today's darlings are feather-legged Gypsy Cobs and Vanners, Fell Ponies, and Friesians.

Can you peg tomorrow's favorites? If you can, perhaps you'll be the breeder who beats the odds and makes a living breeding horses.

Make Money With Horses; You Can Do It
by Don Blazer; (Success Is Easy; 2003)

Starting and Running Your Own Horse Business
by Mary Ashby McDonald (Storey Books; 1997)

Pigs

It's true: most small-to-medium size commercial confinement hog operations have closed shop due to high overhead costs and low pork prices.

However, pastured pigs are easily cared for and organic, humanely raised pork is in demand. Many folks enjoy working with pigs.

If that's you, investigate those profitable specialty markets; ATTRA can help show you the way. Ask for a free, sustainable pig production report.

Sustainable Hog Production

www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/Hogs.html

Adding Value to Pork Production

www.ciras.iastate.edu/porkmanual

Considerations in Organic Hog Production

www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/omhog.pdf

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Rabbits

Raising bunnies for pets, fiber (Angora) and table meat makes good sense, but don't go big time right away.

If you find a meat rabbit buyer who accepts your fryers or you're willing to create a local market, go for it. Otherwise, you probably shouldn't go large scale commercial with bunnies at this time.

Commercial Rabbit Production

www.msstate.edu/dept/poultry/pub1384.htm

Sheep

Sheep once were considered "mortgage lifters"; now it costs more to shear commercial sheep than the wool is worth. But lamb prices remain fairly strong, especially lamb marketed to coincide with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious feasts.

Because hair (meat) sheep shed their fleece, they don't require shearing—and they breed out of season, producing marketable lambs at just the right times. Hair sheep are growing increasingly popular with niche market lamb producers, making them a best bet project for sheep entrepreneurs.

In 1994, the United States imported 66 million pounds of sheep's milk cheese. And according to the University of Wisconsin's report, "A Snapshot of the Dairy Sheep Industry," meat and wool producers can boost their gross incomes by about 75 percent by milking their ewes. The American dairy sheep industry is in its infancy but rapidly expanding.

Other fruitful sheep ventures include marketing specialty fleeces to handspinners, and raising hair sheep, miniature, rare or heritage sheep breeding stock.

Sustainable Sheep Production (ATTRA/2000)

www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/sheep.html

Sheep; A Small-Scale Agriculture Alternative

www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/pubs/brochures/sheep.html

Producing Lamb Organically

www.blackbellysheep.org/articles/producing%20lamb%20organically.htm

Dairy Sheep

www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/dairysheep.html

Agricultural Alternatives: Milking Sheep Production

<http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/FreePubs/pdfs/ua253.pdf>

More Profit With Hair Sheep

www.kerrcenter.com/kerrweb/publications/2002_proceedings/hair_sheep.pdf

Maryland Hair Sheep Resources

www.sheepandgoat.com/hairsheep

Alpacas and Llamas

Are alpacas as profitable as the ads suggest? The answer is, for now, yes. Females run \$10,000-30,000, and a pet or fiber gelding costs \$1,000 or more. In the large scope of livestock choices, there are more investment syndicates doing well in alpacas than any other farm animal investments.

Llamas sell for considerably less than their diminutive cousins, but breeding high-end llamas is very cost-effective too. Llamas can be marketed as pets, pack and cart animals, and as sheep and goat herd sentinels. And both of these friendly camelids produce marketable fleece.

Llama and Alpaca Farming (ATTRA)

www.attra.ncat.org/attrapub/llamaalpaca.html

Raising Alpacas for Fun and Profit—Mostly Profit

www.bankrate.com/brm/news/investing/20010905a.asp

Alpacas as a Business

www.annarboralpacas.com/education/investment.html

Investment topics at Alpacainfo.com

www.alpacainfo.com/newsite/invest/index.html