



Have a Cow

Not many people today think of cattle as “pets,” but it is fairly easy—and enjoyable—to keep one or several animals this way on your hobby farm.

By Sue Weaver

I love my Highland steer. Frazer (named for Scottish-Canadian explorer, Simon Frazer) is an ox-in-training and my best bovine pal. Will we one day eat him? Never!

While farm folk traditionally equate cattle with animated hamburger, an increasing legion of rural dwellers are viewing livestock in a brand new light. House rabbits, Pygmy goats, pot-bellied pigs, and now cattle: they're not just for supper any more.

“What'll you do with him?” ask visitors when I say he isn't abattoir bound. What do you do with pet cattle? There are so many avenues to pursue.

BOVINE CAREERS

Consider driving. Frazer's job is learning to pull a cart. Draft oxen are traditionally hitched in tandem, linked to one another and to the implement they're hauling by means of a sturdy wooden neck yoke. But an ox (a mature draft steer) can wear a modified horse harness or a sleek single yoke. And a cow can pull a cart or wagon too. The advantages? Trained cattle are less reactive than many horses; it's generally safe to loop the reins, hunker back and enjoy their leisurely pace. Tough bovine hooves rarely demand expensive shoeing, and an ox-drawn conveyance really turns heads.

All About Cows

Internet:

Cattle Today
Steer Feeding
Feeding a single bovine; Mississippi State University
Fitting and Showing Beef Cattle
Tips to make your bovine look terrific
Electronic Zoo/Vet Net Cattle Links
Veterinary Education and Information Network Cattle Links

Books:

Natural Cattle Care, by Pat Coleby
(Acres USA; 2001)
The Family Cow, by Dirk Van Loon
(Storey Books; 1983)
Keeping a Family Cow, by Joanne S. Grohman
(Coburn Press; 2000) Have you ever thought of riding a bovine buddy? While the undisputed king of saddle cattle is the Texas Longhorn steer, any sensible, sizable, sturdily built cow or steer can be trained to ride. According to the International Texas Longhorn Association (ITLA), there are 400-plus saddle-trained Longhorn steers in the United States. Saddle and pulling steer events held at ITLA national and regional shows include an intricate trail event in which steers slop through water, weave through pylons, step over an assortment of obstacles and retain their composure while riders navigate a gate, don a crinkly slicker and unlatch and close a rural mailbox. Impressive? Yes!

A petite Jersey, a Dexter, or a gentle miniature dairy cow can provide your family with better dairy products than money can buy, and unlike a plastic milk jug, Bossy makes a great pet, too.

The soft, woolly undercoat curried from molting Galloway and Highland cattle is a fiber artist's joy. Spin it and knit the ultimate cushy, warm mittens. A 2,000-pound ox yields a heap of premium hair!

A pet cow can be artificially inseminated, so you needn't ever own (or visit) a bull. Her calves will be readily salable as pets or breeding stock if her bloodlines are good. Help preserve an old breed or establish a new one—and experience the joys of raising cattle without shipping calves to slaughter.



A cow or steer can mow your yard. Some, such as Scottish Highland cattle, also browse—they'll brush wood lots and grub tree sprouts for you too.

TRAINING

Cattle are intelligent creatures and they readily perform for food. Traditional reward-based training regimens work well with bovines but clicker training, the method used to teach marine animals at attractions such as Sea World, is their forte. Methods designed for clicker training dogs, horses and llamas are easily modified for cattle. You can even teach your bovine to do tricks!

BOVINE BYPRODUCTS

Call it cowpie, cow pat, cow flop or plain oldcow manure, bovines make a load of fertilizer. Fresh cow flop is 5 percent nitrogen, .2 percent phosphoric acid, and 5 percent potash by weight; dried manure has even higher percentages. And it's said to be mildly antiseptic. Old-timers soaked athlete's foot in fresh cowpie, smeared it on their heads to inhibit baldness, and caked it on injuries as a drawing poultice. In India, where cows are sacred, dried cow pats provide cooking fuel and are smoldered to repel mosquitoes.

FINDING A MENTOR

Tame bovines make charming and unusual pets, but they're not for everyone. Before buying a cow, calf or steer, find a mentor to advise you.

County extension agents, veterinarians, experienced oxen drovers, veteran dairyman and beef cattle breeders are excellent choices. Investigate breeds via online search engines. Cattle-oriented mailing lists put new owners in daily touch with helpful cattle keepers from around the globe.

The average cow or steer can live 18 years, some live 25 years or more. Adding a bovine beast to your family is a huge commitment. Be sure you really want a cow or steer before you buy one. Here are the barest basics to consider.

PET CATTLEKEEPING 101

Housing for a cow or steer can be as fancy as a box stall in your horse barn or a simple field shelter. You'll probably need a safe, enclosed area in which to train your animal, either indoors or fenced tall and stout, so it can't leap out. New owners often assume cows can't jump, but frightened or irked cattle can vault a standard pipe gate with ease.

Working enclosures should be solidly built of planks, poles or brawny wire cattle panels at least five- or six-feet tall. Equine round-pen panels work well. If your animal is a miniature, a wee youngster, or already tame when you get him, standard fencing will suffice. There is a lot to be said for starting with a trained pet bovine or a calf!

Pastures should be perimeter fenced using stout, permanent fence posts supporting cattle panels, tightly stretched wire mesh, five or more strands of barbed wire, or four to six strands of high tensile electric fence. Smooth wire won't work unless it's electrified; cattle will squeeze right through. Cross fencing needn't be as elaborate unless you're fencing cattle away from something they mustn't eat. Cattle can pasture with other species; each will dine on plants the other leaves. The exception: some horses harry cattle. If your horse and pet cow can't get along, separate pastures are probably a must.

Cattle require a lot of drinking water. An adult cow will down around 30 gallons a day, more if it's hot or she's lactating. She won't drink as much as she needs from a soiled or scummy water source and probably won't break ice in a waterer that's frozen over. Clean water served lukewarm when the mercury plummets and cool when it soars will encourage her to imbibe all she needs. Cattle appreciate pond access in the summertime. They'll wile away sultry days up to their chins in cool water and drink from the pond as well.

A 2,200 pound Minnesota-based riding steer, a Hoosier farmer's miniature Zebu pasture ornament, and a Georgia family's milking Jersey all require radically different diets, vaccinations and deworming schedules.

While book and online resources can spell out the basics of cattlekeeping, always discuss important points with your county agricultural extension agent and a cattle-savvy local veterinarian before bringing Bossy home.

CATTLE CARE

Cattle are ruminants. Their four-compartment stomachs allow them to eat their food then hunker down, bring it back up as a cud and rechew it at leisure. Unless you (or a calf) milk your cow, it'll probably do best on a predominately hay and pasture diet. No matter which local forage you choose for your cow or steer, it should be high quality, dust-free, and fed



from a hayrack or a clean, dry spot on the ground. Cattle and moldy feed spell disaster; never feed moldy hay or musty, sour grain to your cow or steer.

Cattle attract flies. The worst are horn and face flies, but deer flies, horse flies, gnats and black flies are attracted to cattle too. Drove of biting flies cause cattle to rub, race and fret, so control is a must. Insecticide-laced ear tags, oral larvicides, pour-ons, sprays and dust bags or back scrubbers are all viable options; but because pesky horn flies develop resistance to the chemicals used in these controls, it's important to rotate organophosphate and pyrethroid products every few years. Face flies spread pinkeye, a highly contagious bacterial infection that can lead to blindness unless aggressively treated. Fortunately, most horn fly control products also repel face flies and other bloodsucking pests.

Well-nourished cattle kept in dry, tidy surroundings don't require a lot of coat care but you'll need a cattle comb to groom your shedding beast and chase caked-on mud and muck when it accumulates. Most cattle appreciate being hosed with cool water on hot, steamy summer days. Expect to hand pick burrs, tiny sticks and other debris from long-coated breeds and from forelocks and tail swishes.

Hooves need trimming every few months. Hire a professional who will load your animal in a mobile chute and use power tools to shape his hooves, or teach your pet to pick up his feet and do the job with simple hand tools yourself. Visit Purdue University's "Trimming Hooves" page online to see how it's properly done.

Continually sloppy footing in barns, cow lots or pastures leads to foot rot, a nasty bacterial malady that thrives in mucky manure and invades via scratched or abraded feet (see "Livestock Q&A" on page 12 for a more detailed discussion of foot rot). Untreated foot rot can cause permanent disability, and is extremely painful to the animal. Keep your cow or steer out of mud.

All cattle are strong, and unhandled ones are reactive. It takes a certain amount of strength and agility to tame and train a bovine. Horned cattle can be especially dangerous; beginners shouldn't buy a wild, snorty cow or steer with horns. Older cattle can be dehorned but it's a grisly, agonizing process. Choose a calf or a tame adult member of horned breeds, or opt for a dehorned or naturally polled cow or steer.

BUY A BETTER BOVINE

Many first-time buyers choose a calf, and this is a logical choice. However, because calves are more susceptible to certain diseases and stresses than older cattle, buying a baby is a process fraught with danger. Discuss calf-rearing issues with your county extension agent or veterinarian before buying a tiny baby—you must be fully prepared and in the know before you do.

Any calf should be purchased from a reliable source. "Don't buy a calf from a sale barn," says dairy farmer Lori Armstrong of Thayer, Mo. "Cattle at a sale might look perfectly healthy but you can bring home a lot of disease that way. For a pet I'd buy a bucket calf (bottle baby) from a dairy farm; it will look to you as mama. It's not long before a calf is big enough to start dragging you around, but a bucket calf is smaller so it's easy to train. I'd recommend a Jersey. Jerseys are naturally social; they make really good family cows."

Another option: Buy a trained or partially trained weanling calf or older heifer, cow or steer from a reputable beef breeder. Nick and Anneke Self of Bent Creek Farm near Greenville, Tenn., bred our boy Frazer. A husky 10-month-old calf when he joined us, Frazer was already gentled and he led and stood tied like a pro. "We take our cattle to exhibitions," explains Anneke, "so we work with our calves, we teach them basic things, the sort of things Frazer knows. Quite a few Highland breeders do that. It wouldn't be hard to find a handled Highland, even an adult, if [you] check around."

Before choosing a breed, consider what you plan to do with your pet. Ornamental organic lawnmower? Any breed that intrigues you will do.

But if you have your heart set on a riding steer, a Longhorn or Highland makes more sense than a Jersey or Zebu. An Angus family milk cow? Get a Guernsey instead! Any steer makes a fine ox, but for massive pulling power try a Chianina. And for compact cuteness, opt for a Dexter or a miniature Longhorn. If you want to win ribbons, choose a breed that's popular in your locale.

Availability may be an issue. Most miniature breeds and some heritage and imported breeds are in demand, as well as breeds listed on the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy's endangered list.

Evaluate your climate and facilities. While they'll adapt, Highlands in Florida and Brahmans in northern Minnesota are definitely out of their element. Small acreage? Think Dexters, Jerseys, Guernseys, and miniatures when space is at a



premium.

Which sex? Cows and steers make fine pets; for the casual cattle keeper, bulls do not. Working cattle are traditionally castrated males, but cows can pull carts and pack riders too.

Finally, do you recognize cattle ailments, afflictions, and conformation anomalies when you see them? Do you know what to ask about vaccinations, breeding stock bloodlines, and other nuances of cattle selling? If not, ask someone who does to help evaluate potential purchases. Don't choose unwisely because you're unaware.

So go ahead, have a cow—or a heifer, steer, ox or calf—and enjoy the ultimate hobby-farm pet.

About the Author: Sue Weaver is a freelance writer and hobby farmer, based in Arkansas with her husband, John, and menagerie of animals including a Highland steer, horses, goats and dogs.

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