

How Now, Tiny Cow? On Raising Small Cows

Miniature cattle have become a hot livestock property. Learn the history and evolution of these diminutive breeds.

By Sue Weaver

Once upon a time in the early days of the 20th century, cows didn't weigh 1,200 pounds nor did bulls tip the scale at over a ton.

Cattle were smaller, compact and kind. Bred for family utility, they put rich, creamy milk in the icebox and lean, tasty meat on the dinner table.

Miniature Cattle Resources

Lists and Forums:

[Miniature Cattle Corral Bulletin Board](#)

[Miniature Cattle](#)

[Miniature Zebu Cattle](#)

[Dexter Cattle](#)

[Rare Livestock](#)

[Resource Sites:Miniature Cattle Corral](#)
Loads of links, cow games, a message board and a gift store

[Miniature Links at Cattle Today](#)

[Miniature Cattle Webring](#)

More Resources:

[American Dexter Cattle Association](#)
(952) 215 2206

[American Lowline Registry](#)
(816) 221-0641

[American Hereford Association](#)
(816) 842-3757

[International Miniature Zebu Association](#)
(308) 665-3919

[Belfair Miniature Cattle Registry](#)
P.O. Box 942
Rochester, WA 98579-0942
(360) 273-7789

[International Miniature Cattle Breeders Society and Registry](#)
(253) 631-1911

[Animal Research Foundation \(ARF\)](#)
(903) 356-2267

Top Simple fences contained them or families tethered them in yards on chains. They thrived on simple fare: cut-and-carry forage and mangels, or other root crops from the garden. Children handled them and sometimes called them pets. Most families had such a cow and life was good.

Times changed. Mankind migrated to the city. People lost touch with the family cow, yet they yearned for milk, butter and steaks.

Remaining country dwellers' small cows couldn't supply enough goods to meet burgeoning demands. As the number of commercial cattle raisers increased, so did the size of the cows. "We'll breed bigger cattle!" came the producers' battle cry, and the compact, garden-variety cow almost ceased to exist.

Enter the new millennium. For city folk and suburbanites retracing their forebears' paths back to the farm, today's hobby farms are perfectly sized for yesterday's cherished small cows.

And they're out there: wee cattle as ancient as the dual-purpose Dexters and as innovative and new as the Happy Mountain Miniature Pandas.

A brand new legion of hobby farmers are rallying behind miniature cattle.

"Their small size makes them easier to manage and less destructive to fences and equipment," explains Linda McKay of AAA Lowlines, Harker Heights, Texas. "The stocking rate is two or three minis to one full-size cow. They can be used for beef and/or milk—and they are just plain cute!"

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A Few Small-Cow Benefits If you want to have a cow, you'll need less pasture and far less space to house a mini version. If you must pen her and feed cut-and-carry forage, it's doable. Her wee hooves and bantam weight equate with far less pasture damage and she's designed to eat grass, not concentrates. She'll neatly thrive on one third the feed of her full-size kin and use it to produce much less waste for you to cart away. Come autumn, you'll haul less hay. And you'll tote fewer buckets of water to quench her thirst during the deep, hard winter freeze.

However, minis are like potato chips, you won't settle for just one. And for the small-scale farmer hoping to qualify land for ag-tax breaks or to turn a profit, this is a very good thing indeed.

Beth Diaz of Seffner, Fla., concurs. "We live outside of Tampa Bay in a small agricultural area," she says. "We wanted to take advantage of tax cuts and also have cattle to help keep our pastures clean. Essentially, we wanted to become gentleman farmers. We weren't looking for meat sales, so we decided to stick to one breed and raise babies to sell for 4-H or to others interested in our breed. One day my search led me to a Miniature Zebu website and I was hooked."

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Small Cows Offer Tasty Meat

Yet minis do equate with fine beef. Gourmet markets and upscale restaurants clamor for lean and luscious, grass-fed mini steaks and roasts.

Demand for organic edibles increases 20 percent per year claims the Organic Products Association. The good news for organic beef growers: Miniatures convert pricey organic feed into choice cuts more efficiently than standard cattle do.

Texas A&M confirms a 20 to 25 percent higher feed conversion rate for miniature cows. And a single miniature steer neatly packs the average home freezer, so there's no need to find someone to buy the other half of beef, making the meat popular with home consumers.

And dairy breed and dual-purpose minis give plenty of sumptuous, high-protein milk—enough for today's smaller household and then some. Mini Jerseys, Belfairs and Dexters all serve well as gentle family milk cows, exactly like their ancestors did not so very long ago.

And They Make Good Pets

And gentle they are. Mini cattle fans unanimously agree: These little bovines make marvelous pets. "I started with a trio of Miniature Jerseys," says K.C. Cowen of Emmett, Idaho, "but I have disabilities and couldn't milk more than one. So now I have just Margie. She's the light of my life and the sweetest cow I've ever owned. Margie is like a big dog, except she

gives the best milk.”

“My most recent purchase was a 5-year-old Lowline bull from Centenary Ranch in Mission, Texas,” adds Linda McKay. “Although I’m his third owner, he’s quiet-natured and friendly.” She chuckles, “Our Lowlines ‘helped’ us with our pen construction by carrying tools. They’re so intelligent and a delight to have around.”

Petting zoo proprietors and animal therapy workers adore miniature cattle; 4-Hers tend to love them too. Their modest stature, winsome looks and engaging personalities render them less intimidating than their full-size cousins, and they are far less bulky to load and pack around.

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What is a Miniature Cow?

Are today’s miniatures mirror images of our ancestors’ small utility cows? Yes ... and no. Miniatures with standard-size counterparts such as Jerseys, Lowline Angus and Herefords usually are. But other mini breeds (such as Miniature Highlands, Longhorns and some of the International Miniature Cattle Breeders Society and Registry breeds) are modern creations developed by crossing small standard-size cattle with established small breeds (usually Dexters).

And the Dexter stands alone. Because of its elfin stature, most folks consider the Dexter a miniature. However, they’re a diminutive ancient breed rather than a scaled-down modern one.

How tall is a mini cow? That depends.

According to the International Miniature Cattle Breeders Society and Registry (IMCBSR), any bovine 3 years of age or older measuring 42 inches or under at its hips is a miniature; a second classification, “midsize miniature,” exists for minis over 42 inches and up to 48 inches tall.

International Miniature Zebu Association cattle, however, are measured behind their Brahma-type humps and mustn’t exceed 42 inches at 3 years of age. The American Hereford Association stipulates that Miniature Herefords must tape 43 inches or smaller; “classic miniatures” can be up to 48 inches tall. Lowlines (Miniature Angus) may be 42 inches high, as can Dexter cows; Dexter bulls can be two inches taller.

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5 Breeds of Mini Cows

Who registers them? The IMCBSR maintains herd books for 26 breeds and the Animal Research Foundation registers miniature bovines of every breed. Miniature Herefords, Angus (Lowlines), Zebus, Jerseys and Dexters can be registered with both organizations but also support herd books of their own.

These represent the big five of the miniature bovine world.

DEXTERS

Today’s Dexter cattle descend from a herd of hardy Irish mountain cattle assembled by Mr. Dexter, agent to Lord Hawarden, around 1750. Dexter roots trace to the tiny Celtic cattle of ancient Eire. By 1845, when author David Low described and referred to them by name, they already resembled today’s Dexter cattle.

Irish fanciers established a Dexter registry in 1887 and an American version followed in 1911. Yet North American Dexters were ever scarce; today they’re included on the American Livestock Breed Conservancy’s Conservation Priority List, classified as rare. (If you’d like to help preserve an endangered heritage livestock breed, consider raising Dexters. They need your helping hand.)

Dexters are strikingly small cattle. Most Dexters are colored in shades of deepest ebony to sun-tinged, reddish-black. Reds and duns are far less common and grade from palest red to darkest mahogany; reds have pink noses, while duns have brown noses. Black-tipped white horns usually accent their small, neat heads, although a line of polled (hornless) Dexters now exists. There are two types: a longer-legged version (Kerry type) and a Dexter with shorter legs.

Dexters are dual-purpose cattle. Thanks to the breed’s foraging ability, and its high feed conversion and meat-to-bone ratios, a grass-fed Dexter steer will finish in 18 to 24 months, dressing out at 50 to 60 percent live weight. Dexter beef is fine-textured, tender and delicious. And Dexter cows give 1.5 to 3 gallons of roughly 4 percent butterfat milk daily, at a rate of up to one quart of cream per gallon.

Dexters are famous for their strong maternal instinct, easy calving, sweet dispositions and longevity. They do, however, occasionally throw dwarf “bulldog” calves.

LOWLINES

Lowlines are Miniature Angus cattle developed by the Trangie Agricultural Research Centre in Australia. No “outside” blood was used in its creation—they are purebred Angus bred 30 to 60 percent smaller than their standard (Highline) kin.

Angus beef is treasured for its tenderness and quality, and pound for pound Lowlines produce a lot of it. Enthusiasts claim Lowlines require one third as much feed to produce 70 percent of the rib-eye of animals twice their size, making Lowlines a logical choice for organic and gourmet market beef producers.

Sleek Black Angus are traditionally more docile than other beef breeds. They’re naturally polled and prolific, and are attentive mothers. Lowlines are a red-hot commodity as pets and for purebred programs, and for crossing with standard-size cattle to improve meat quality. When crossed with Jerseys they produce the ideal dual-purpose family cow.

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HEREFORDS

Another scaled-down purebred breed is the Miniature Hereford. In fact, miniatures are registered in the American Hereford Association herd book; their pedigrees are traceable back more than 100 years.

Miniature Herefords were further developed during the 1970s at the Point of Rocks Ranch in Fort Davis, Texas. By utilizing certified dwarf-free, old-fashioned Hereford genetics, owners developed a deeper-bodied, shorter-legged version of today’s market Hereford.

Miniature Herefords are said to mature 20 percent faster than standards. They’re gentle, they adapt to all climates, they’re highly efficient foragers, and veterinarians familiar with beef breeds know how to treat them. Miniature Herefords are a first-rate, easy-care choice for gourmet and organic beef producers.

ZEBUS

“Zebu” is another name for *Bos indicus*—all breeds of Asian humped cattle. Most folks recognize the brawny Brahman, a full-size Zebu developed in North America. Miniature Zebus resemble Brahmans with notable twists: Mini Zebus’ upright ears don’t match the Brahman’s trademark floppy ones, and Miniature Zebu cows have a lot less hump. Both breeds, however, sport short, sleek coats; tough, loose skin; and have fully functional sweat glands. Highly developed panniculus muscles make it easy for Zebus to twitch away flies. They’re heat, disease and insect resistant; thrive on marginal pasture; and rodeo-bull image notwithstanding, they are easygoing and remarkably intelligent.

Descended from South Indian Nadudana cattle, Miniature Zebus were imported for zoo display in the 1920s. Today the International Miniature Zebu Association (formed in 1991) lists breeders in 38 states, Canada and Puerto Rico. They are among the teeniest of miniature cattle, sometimes standing less than 30 inches measured behind the hump.

JERSEYS

Until recently, historically speaking, registered Jerseys were barely more than today’s miniature size. While the “bigger is better” boom ultimately impacted this ancient dairy breed, enough bantam Jerseys remained to make selectively breeding them back to miniature frame a relatively easy task.

For today’s smaller households seeking a pocket-size family cow, Miniature Jerseys make good sense. They are gentle, prolific and a delight for the eyes. And their delicious, high-butterfat milk is hard to beat!

While Miniature Jersey steers don’t produce a freezer full of meat, what they do yield is mighty fine eating indeed. Therefore, Jerseys have been and are still being used to create new miniature beef and dairy breeds. Belfairs are Jersey and Dexter derivatives, as are IMCBSR trademarked Belmonts (both are sometimes called Irish Jerseys). Wherever they’re used, wee Jerseys sweeten the mix.

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Getting Started with Miniature Cattle ([Click here to find out more!](#))

Miniature cattle are generally in short supply. They're available—but expect to conduct a search before you buy.

Registries happily supply breeder lists; and e-mail groups are excellent places to scout for leads. Expect prices to vary widely depending on breed and bloodlines, quality, age and sex, and in which part of the country you do your shopping.

A few progressive miniature cattle raisers market fullblood embryos. Implant success rate runs 50 to 60 percent, but it's a start for those with access to a good reproductive vet and a sense of adventure.

Sometimes you can start with the cattle you have and breed toward purebred miniatures.

While mechanics vary from registry to registry, the basics are much the same. For example: You own a full-size Jersey cow. Breed her to your choice of miniature bulls. Her calf will be recorded (not registered) as a half-blood miniature. If the calf is a heifer that eventually gets bred to another miniature of the same breed, her calf will be recorded as three-quarters miniature. And on and on until your calf is 15¼16 target breed, at which time it's considered purebred.

However, not all organizations allow "up-breeding" (the Lowline and Hereford registries do not) and most don't record upgrade-produced purebreds in the same herd book as bona fide fullbloods. Regardless, it's a fun and easy way to get started.

Cute and productive, miniature cattle will mow your lawn, pull a cart, or simply pretty up your pastures. Let your kids show them in 4-H. Drink their milk, pack your freezer with miniature steaks. They'll earn you tax breaks and turn a profit sold as breeding stock, pets or beef. What more could you ask for?

About the Author

Sue Weaver is a freelance writer and hobby farmer, currently raising American Curly horses, goats, sheep, a Scottish Highland steer and an assortment of other animals. She is based in Arkansas.

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