



Goats

Transcript – Breeding Goats

Hi everyone. Tasha Greer, contributor at The Grow Network, here to talk with you about raising goats. In particular today I want to talk to you about breeding, pregnancy, and kidding. If you plan to maintain a dairy herd, want to produce your own meat livestock or need to increase your fiber goat population, then you will need to breed your goats regularly. Goat breeding is a very basic process. When a doe is in heat which is also called estrus, they are basically fertile and ready to become pregnant. If your doe is not in estrus, there is no potential chance for your doe to become pregnant. Estrus is usually pretty easy to identify. They tend to be extremely vocal when it's happening, they tend to be a little bit more competitive with the rest of the herd, they may either show submissive or dominant behavior and either mount or allow themselves mounted by the females in the herd. Their vulva can also become noticeably swollen. Then you know you have a short window, usually of 36 hours or less, to expose your doe to a buck.

That little lady up in pasture is actually staring across the way to our buck pen. She's separated herself from the other ladies, her tail is wagging, she's very talkative. When that happens, if you expose them to a buck who's in good, healthy condition, chances are they'll end up pregnant. The actual act of breeding really only takes a few seconds. When you see it live for the first time, I think you'll be shocked. Basically, the female, if she's ready, she stands pretty calm. The male may do a little bit of romancing in advance and then he'll basically mount her from the back and the process is finished. Many times, just to make sure that the deed is done, you might want to leave your doe with your buck for a couple hours, but that's usually not even necessary. It's kind of remarkable how easy it is to get a healthy doe pregnant by a capable buck.

There are actually three different ways to go about it. The first is artificial insemination. This involves going to the internet or talking to a breeder and ordering some semen from a sire and a sire is what we call a buck who's basically being hired out for service to impregnate does. So, you hire a sire and you get their semen shipped to you and then you use an injection device to impregnate your female doe. Now that process, because there could be complications in the shipping process, the semen may not be as fresh as you need it to be or temperature changes or things like that affect the quality, that's not the most consistently effective method of breeding a goat. And a lot of times with artificial insemination you'll want to do a pregnancy test about a month after exposure just to make sure the pregnancy actually took.

You can also hire a sire and basically, this can unfold in several ways. Out here in the country where I live, there are actually a few services where someone will bring a buck to your farm or your homestead and they'll just drop off that buck and let that buck stay with your girls for 30 or 40 days just to make sure all the does in your herd get a chance to have an exposure to the buck and then they'll come pick that buck back up. Also sometimes you can just drive your doe the day she's in estrus, you just put her in your car, take her over to the breeder, you walk your doe into their buck; they have their experience, you bring your doe back home and that's the end of the process. Those methods are becoming much less common though as people become more concerned about viruses and illnesses.

For people that have the space and the facilities and the desire to maintain their own buck, that is actually often considered the easiest answer because you can provide a basic shelter like we talked about in our episode on shelters and pastures. You can give the bucks a nice, fairly decent sized pasture that is their dedicated space. We also call that a buck pen. They eat a lot of weeds, they eat hay, they eat your grain and things like that just like the does do. They don't generally require as much calcium in their diet, so you wouldn't give them anything like alfalfa. They do still require minimal supplements to keep them in great shape, but bucks are pretty easy to care for because you're not going to be

milking them. What you really need is a safe space for them to be confined away from your does, you need enough room that they're adequately entertained and you also need to give them a companion. Some people will keep two bucks in a pen. The benefit of that you'll have genetic diversity, so for example if you breed your main buck to your doe and she has a doeling that you think is just wonderful and worth keeping and making part of your herd. Then when that doeling gets ready for being bred, rather than breeding to her genetic father, you would use your second buck as her partner to breed her with. That way you maintain genetic diversity. Now if you're not going to be keeping any of your doelings and raising them up and using them as does, then you really only need one buck and, in that case, you can actually keep them with a weather. And sometimes bucks kept with a weather are a little bit calmer because when they're with another buck, there's a lot of competition.

There are a few reasons I highly recommend that you keep a separate buck pen and shelter if you do plan to have your own buck. First of all, that estrus cycle that I talked about earlier, depending on the breed of goat you get, some goats are able to become pregnant year-round. The Nigerian Dwarf mini goats are a perfect example. They can literally be bred every 21 days all throughout the year. The pygmies also show some of that tendency and many of the Nubians have also been noted to have estrus cycles that happen at different times of the year. Now the number-two reason is that the bucks can stress out of the does a little bit. Even when they're not in estrus, the males give a lot of attention to the females and sometimes the females don't appreciate all of that attention. So, it's generally nicer for your does if they don't have to be with the buck all the time.

Because the males pee on their faces to make themselves smell strong and virile and easily attract the female does to them, they are a little bit fragrant and when they spend a lot of time with the females, they'll rub that fragrance all over the females and so when you bring your does into the milk room, you bring that fragrance with you. Milk is very susceptible to aroma which is why it makes great cheese and so it can actually draw in some of that buck aroma and that can create that goaty taste that a lot of people don't like.

Even as an experienced goat keeper, it can be very difficult to tell for certain if your doe is pregnant. There are a couple tricks that I use. The first is look for signs of heat or estrus after my does been exposed to the goat. A lot of times if the exposure's been successful, they will not show signs of heat again, so that's one good indicator. Now that's not 100 percent foolproof because there are some goats that will still have sort of a false heat. It's not too common, but it does happen. Also sometimes I just like to leave my does in with my buck for a while even after they've been exposed and I think they're pregnant and that's because after a couple of exposures when their bodies start to have some of those indicators of pregnancy that the male buck can pick up on, the bucks will actually lose interest in the females. So sometimes if I can't tell for sure if my females are going in and out of heat or not, I'll watch my buck's behavior to see if my buck is still showing interest. Obviously, he's still showing some interest in these ladies, so it's not entirely sure yet whether they're pregnant.

Until about the last six weeks before your goats begin labor, it can also be really hard to tell from physical indications whether they're pregnant or not. Because of this natural bow shape, particularly in the small breeds, it's even more pronounced in them, it can be tough to see if there are any babies in there. And also, sometimes if you think your doe is pregnant, you might be overfeeding them and they might not actually be pregnant. They might just be getting fat, so it can be really tricky to tell given those bowed sides whether a doe is actually pregnant just by visual inspection. But about a month before they're actually due their udders will start to swell. Sometimes it happens at a month, but sometimes it might be more like two weeks in advance, but if you don't see it within two weeks of when a doe is due to give birth, then there's a good chance they're not even pregnant.

Then just a couple of days before they really are about to give birth or even just the last 24 hours, their udder will swell noticeably and in that case, it's kind of clear to you, oh the labor is coming. Does make also start sort of nesting which basically they'll go find places that they feel going to be secure and comfortable to have their babies. You might see them just sort of doing a lot of circling and a lot of scratching around and sort of scaring other members of the herd away from those locations. So those are sort of some late-stage indicators, but for everything in between, it is really hard to tell. And so I really recommend, but for new goat keepers, try if you can to expose your goats for a longer period

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of time to a buck that you know is viable so that way you increase your rates of success and don't get fooled into thinking you've got a false pregnancy. If you're really worried about it, then you can also look at getting pregnancy tests. Now they can be a little bit costly and difficult to do, but you can talk to your vet about the options that they've got available at their office or there are also some online resources for home pregnancy tests for goats.

There are two minerals that I want to make you aware of as you're thinking about having kids and managing your pregnancies and also managing the fertility of your herd and those are copper and selenium. Now selenium is extremely toxic if taken in too large of doses, so before you ever administer selenium to your goats, I highly recommend that you talk to your large animal vet and find out whether selenium is a deficient mineral in your area and whether your goats might need it or not. And then get their advice on how much and when to administer it. Copper also has some associated toxicity rates, but the method that most goat keepers use for administering copper to their herd usually doesn't cause problems as long as you follow directions. The method we use is called a copper bolus and it's literally -- a bolus is a pill. It's a capsule just like if you're taking a Tylenol. It's got those plastic capsules around it. That's what a bolus is; inside there will be little copper filaments and they're basically tiny little shreds of copper and what will happen is you can stuff that in a piece of banana or in a marshmallow and feed it to your goats. They'll happily eat it. That copper bolus will go into their digestive system and the outer capsule/bolus will dissolve and be digested and the copper will remain in their systems and break down slowly over time, giving them supplemental copper as their bodies need it. Copper boluses if they're necessary are usually administered before trying to get your goats pregnant and then some people will give it one month before your goats are actually due to kid. So that's why it also helps to know your possible labor dates so that you can administer any supplements that you need to prior to the due date.

Goat gestation periods, they last for the small goats like these guys, it's about 145 days. Now I'd say it's been plus or minus four days in my case. Some have given birth four days earlier, some four days later. Usually, it's later not earlier, so I don't worry so long as they're within that 145-150 kind of day range. But with the large goats, it takes a little bit longer, so their gestation period gets to be closer to 150 days and that can also range out until about 155 days. If you have a mixed breed, if it's a mini Nigerian crossed with an Alpine or a LaMancha, then it could be anything in-between.

Goats have been having babies without human assistance forever. Now that doesn't mean you don't want to participate because goats also have failed labor and complications that as a human being, we can help solve and make sure we get a better result than goats would have in nature. But there are certainly some people who just let their goats have their kids alone on pasture and they sort of leave it up to nature and that is perfectly acceptable way to raise goats; people have done it forever. If you have a large herd that's likely the way that you do it. So there's no judgment or criticism of that method, but when you have a small herd like this and you're really focused on maintaining production of milk and making sure you get the products that you want from your goats, then you may want to be a little more hands-on.

So, goats can go into labor 24 hours a day and so if you do want to be there for the moment when it actually happens, then you will need to put together some sort of monitoring system. A lot of people just use those radio-controlled monitoring devices. My goats are close enough and loud enough that I just leave my bedroom window open when they're due and then I can actually hear when they start labor. I've read statistics that about five percent of goat kiddings don't go well and I don't exactly know where that data comes from. I will tell you that my personal experience and the experience of all the goat keepers I know, is that the five percent average must be over a long period of time because for example I know a goat keeper last year had 27 kids and out of those 27 kids, seven of them didn't make it. We had a particularly rainy year, we all experienced selenium deficiencies that we've never had before, so there were lots more labor complications in our area than goat keepers around here were used to having.

It was just sort of a number of things that went wrong in many of the herds around here and so the survival rates were much lower than usual. So, if you do the statistics on that one incident, that's not five percent, but if you keep goats for 15 or 20 years, then if that's your only instance, then maybe you get closer to that five percent total. When you're a home grow keeper and you have a small herd that you're really attached to, losses feel terrible, but they do occur. So, I just want you to be mentally prepared that you will not be able to save every baby. Now there are some who have just gotten so fantastic at helping with labor, they're like goat midwives, that they have no losses and they also maybe use

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the supplements and things and do a little bit more scientific evaluation of the health of their goats than your average goat keeper. And so, you can get to that place where you really have no losses, but you probably won't be there in your first few years as a goat keeper.

I've heard competing advice on whether or not to intervene with goat births. So, there's one theory that intervention can actually complicate things because you're not working in a sterile environment so if you go in to check what's going on with your goat you can introduce some sort of bacteria or virus or something that you actually make things worse. It's true, you're in a barn. It's certainly not going to be a sterile environment and so you certainly can create complications if you're not prepared. But then there's the other side of things that goats generally have pretty seamless births within 20 to 30 minutes, so the longer they're in labor, the more stress they have, the longer their recovery period, the less milk production you're going to get because their bodies are taking longer to recover. Then you can have complications with bonding and other things. So, there are a number of goat keepers who also basically go in and check, make sure that a baby is well positioned, and that the mom's labor is going to be as straightforward as possible. I can't make those decisions for you, but I will give you some links to sort of help you see the different perspectives so you can decide how involved you'd like to be in your goat births.

The major complications are really just malpositioning, so a lot of times the baby might need to be turned. A lot of times a goat will even have a malpositioned baby, so they don't always have to be turned. Another complication is if you are having a selenium deficiency problem, sometimes the kids are born with white muscle disease and some of those kids just simply don't make it out of the womb on their own and so sometimes you really do have to intervene in that case and get them the selenium supplement as soon as they come out. Something else you might see is a prolapse. You can have a vaginal prolapse or an anal prolapse and basically the pressure of the kids in the womb just sort of pushes the lining of the anal area and the lining of the vagina out into the world; looks a little bit like a big red sausage. When that happens, it looks horrible but is usually something you can solve at home. So, once you get through labor, then you actually soak it in sugar water and that reduces the swelling. You push it back inside. If it stays on its own, great, if not then you have to put a couple stitches in. It sounds really frightening the first time it happens, but when you're actually dealing with the procedure, which I've done once, it's not that complicated. More serious complications usually require a large vet's assistance so before you go into labor, you do want to have a number on your speed dial on your phone. Keep your cellphone with you in case you need to make that call.

The most exciting and also most stressful time for me in the kidding/labor and pregnancy season is actually just after kids are born. In cold weather, there's this big rush to get kids dry and get them nursing underneath their mom. In warm weather, there's either this sort of hurry up and get them nursing so they don't get lethargic and fatigued by the heat. So, having some sort of supplemental heat or maybe having a fan that you use to help keep the environment a little more comfortable during labor, those things actually do make a really big difference.

I saw a tip online once that instead of having a straw bed for the babies to be born on, you can actually put down a feed bag, one of those leftover paper feed bags or one of those polypropylene feed bags and when the kids come out, you can set them on that or have the mom drop them on that and that way they don't get straw all over them and then you can get your towel and the first thing you want to do is clean their faces. You want to open their mouths and sort of clear out everything there. Focus on the head and ears and getting all of that clean to make sure they get breathing right away. And then after that, if the mom's still occupied or she has more babies in the pipeline, you can clean off the rest of the baby or if you want at that point as long as it's not too cold, you can let the mom do the rest of the cleaning. That's usually the way I like to handle it. So, the cleaning process is also a bonding process. I mean they just came out of the womb and they're covered in goo and they come out and so the mom will actually lick all of that off. And that's a bonding process but it's also a stimulating process because it gets their blood flowing and really sort of helps them acclimate to the new world that they've just come into.

However, if your doe has four kids sometimes by the time the fourth one comes, they simply don't have the energy or the tongue strength to keep licking their kids. So, if you're having multiples, then you may want to help out a bit more. On that subject, how many kids should you expect? That's always the question. Now some of it's genetic. It depends on

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the genetic line of your buck and your doe and what's most common for their bloodlines. Some of it's fertility. If your goats are young and really great healthy sometimes, they'll have more babies. I have one doe; she always has quads for me. She's really good about it. It's no problem at all for her. She doesn't seem stressed. It's just a naturally perfect number for her. For most of my others, I have the best result with mini breeds when they get triplets because the triplets don't end up being too large, so the labor even though it's three and seems like it would be hard, the babies are a little bit smaller and so they come out a lot easier for these little guys. With big breeds though, one to two is more typical. Triplets would be pretty stressful on one of those large breeds, but if you cross them with a mini goat so for example if you have an Alpine with a Nigerian buck, then you might get triplets.

Right after birth you really want to give the mom and their kids that bonding time, give them maybe 20 minutes to a half an hour, but if you don't see the kids nursing then I really recommend that you go ahead and milk your mom, your doe and put that colostrum in a bottle and dole it out to the kids in equal shares as quickly as you can get it into them because it is absolutely critical that those kids get colostrum when they first come out. They come out with absolutely no immunity to anything that is in their environment. That colostrum is their immune system for the first 24 hours and also for the first few weeks after that while they start to develop the immune system. So, if you don't get colostrum in them, your kids are going to be very sickly and weak and you're going to have a lot of health problems and in most cases, your kids will not make it. I recommend just in case something goes wrong with your doe that you also keep a backup of colostrum in your freezer. Obviously, if you've never kidded before you can't have your own colostrum so you might want to see if you can get some from an experienced goat keeper or you can get colostrum replacer at the store, but the real stuff is the best stuff. Most recommendations say you should get as much colostrum into your kids as possible in the first six hours. So you do want to get a couple ounces into them in the first two hours and then within the first six hours, you want to try to get the majority of what you were able to milk from your doe or the majority of what she had in her udder at the time of their birth into those little babies.

When you have multiple kids sometimes there might be a kid that's a little bit slower to develop and they may not nurse as well, so if you have any runty kids, I highly recommend that you bottle-feed them as well just to make sure that they keep their growth rates the same as the rest of your kids. Some goat keepers do nothing but bottle feed and they will actually pasteurize the milk as it comes out because milk is one way the doe can transmit diseases to their kids, so if you collect and pasteurize the milk and then feed pasteurized milk to the kids, then the kids will be much less likely to inherit any diseases or viruses from their mom.

For the most part breeding, pregnancy and labor are all pretty easy processes that nature has kind of got these perfect methods evolved through the years and you're really just kind of supporting those processes and only intervening when you absolutely have to. But it can be a little bit stressful, so I also recommend that throughout this time you take care of yourself and appreciate the beauty of the process and your good fortune in being able to participate in it.