



Goats

Transcript – Feeding Goats

Figuring out what to feed your goats to keep them healthy is kind of a moving target. The thing is goats are extremely adaptable. There is a common misperception that goats will eat anything. The truth is that goats can eat a lot of things and they'll probably sample almost anything, but they won't necessarily decide that it's a good idea to eat it. They do eat things like your clothes particularly if they're made of cotton because cotton is something that a goat would definitely eat in nature. They'll also sample a tin can, but they probably won't chew it up and eat it, so you don't really have to worry about those rumors.

Really though, goat feed is pretty important. It is actually the baseline for keeping goats healthy and for providing them the best care possible. Ideally, you'll want to give your goats some access to fresh pasture, and the more access the better because if you can rotationally graze them, as in move them from one location to another, you can help keep their parasite loads down and generally offer them more variety. You can also keep them from overgrazing your plants, so the plants can regrow and offer more nutritious food in the long run for your goats. They're not great lawnmowers, so if you're getting one to just basically keep your lawn all at one level, you're probably better going with a sheep because a sheep is actually a true grass eater. Goats, they like to eat some grass, but they also like to reach up high and eat the leaves off trees and the bark off trees. They like to eat taller weeds.

In fact for goats, the main health problem that you'll find when you start doing your research and even when you bring them home is that they always carry a parasite load and these parasites literally live in their digestive system and usually, it's not an issue and they just kind of hang out in there. But the second your goat crosses into a line where they have too many parasites and they don't have the good health to fight them off, then the parasites start to win and your goat's health will decline very quickly. So, nutrition is the basic way that everybody keeps their goats healthy and goats that eat grass and try to keep it low to the ground, they're more susceptible to getting a higher parasite load because the parasites literally, they're in the goat's digestive system. The goats go to the bathroom on the pasture, the parasite eggs, the larvae they'll hatch. Those parasites will crawl to the top of the grass and they'll wait to be re-eaten by the goats.

Now in terms of what they enjoy eating, they are very much like the wild deer that are pests on so many peoples' properties. They love to eat the barks of trees, all the leaves, they like to eat whatever grass is growing, they like flowers and all the different weeds and they love your Hostas and pretty much any non-poisonous plant that you grow, goats will love to eat it. They'll definitely love young saplings, so if you're just starting trees, keep your goats away from them. They will eat grass, but it's better if you let that grass get at least six inches tall so that way they're grazing high and away from the parasite zone.

But they need to have enough access to enough variety that they won't develop imbalances because imbalances lead to problems in their digestive system and those problems in their digestive system lead to all sorts of other health problems. So, in general, when you talk about feeding goats, you're going to be offering them some access to some kind of pasture, but you'll also be supplementing with some additional feed sources just to make sure that you give them access to all the nutrition that they need. Now if you have hundreds of acres of land that is lush and full of hundreds of different kinds of diverse greens, you probably won't have to do a whole lot of supplementation particularly during

warm months, but if you are limiting your goats' access to pasture and you're keeping them confined to smaller areas or don't have that much diversity and pasture, then you're going to have to do a lot more supplementation.

As far as supplementation, there are lots of different ways to go about it. Now hay, I will tell you is absolutely one of the easiest, cheapest, and most common ways of supplemental feeding your goats. What you see here is grass hay. Grass hay is great for goats; they love it. It provides a lot of roughage. It's usually very cheap, you know, somewhere between \$5 and \$6 for a square bale like this and sometimes you can get it even cheaper. It's usually made up of things like timothy, and orchard and rye grass and sometimes Kentucky grasses. So, it's not the most nutritious thing in the world for goats but it's a nice supplement.

Even better sort of hay like alfalfa hay. Alfalfa hay is really high in calcium, it's got a lot more protein. It's definitely a really more complete nutrition source for your goats. Alfalfa hay though is sometimes very hard to find and you know, depending on where you live, sometimes alfalfa requires a lot more spraying than just grasses that grow well in a particular location. In addition to hay, a lot of people, in order to reach the protein and energy requirements that goats will have, supplement with grains. Now when I first started looking into grains, I was like what are you talking about grains? I mean there's all sorts of grains. People use different formulas. Some people when they talk about grains, they're talking about supplementing with corn. Corn is absolutely something your goats can eat a small quantity of but you really need to make sure they have plenty of roughage, lots of access to grains and dry things like leaves and bark and things to help balance their rumen if you're going to be supplementing with corn.

Things like barley seed and rye seed and wheat seed are also grains that you can feed to goats and oats; they really love oats. When you're feeding grains, you can either feed straight grains or if you want to make them more nutritionally available, you can actually ferment or pre-sprout those grains. Now you do want to be careful with fermentation. You want this to be kind of an open-air fermentation. You don't want to do closed-in fermentation because sometimes there can be some additional risks, some mycotoxin risks with that, but generally, if you're just fermenting for a day or two and then feeding these grains, that will usually work out for you. Also, just pre-sprouting; making something like a fodder system, so if you're buying some barley or some rye or some wheat and you're soaking it in some water and you're pre-sprouting it, that can also help make the nutrition available and spread that grain a little bit further.

So, when I first started with goats, I was really afraid of the idea of grains. I didn't know what that meant or what grains or how much of each grain to feed my goats and there's a lot of confusion about that. So, if you don't want to dig too much into the science behind formulating your own feeds, you can also find pelleted feed for goats. Now pelleted feeds usually come in a sweet feed and a non-sweet feed. And the sweet feed is basically those grains put together in the right percentages, broken up and then coagulated with some molasses and they look and smell really quite healthy. A lot of goats like those and a lot of goat owners like to use those. They're great for lactating goats. There's also the dry pellets and those are basically pre-formulated grain mixes and that have been reconstituted into these dry brown pellets and those again, come in the 16-17 percent range and they're also perfect for feeding your goats.

I wouldn't give grain of any sort to your goats as their main diet. You absolutely want to make sure they have access to pasture and to some hay because they need that balance of ingredients to really keep their digestive systems working right, but pellets are a good way to create a baseline nutrition for your goats particularly if they're confined. Now with the pellets, you do get the choice of medicated or non-medicated. I do not feed my dairy goats medicated feed because I just don't find it to be necessary, but my buck and the weather that lives with my buck, I do give them medicated feed because the medicated feed is not just a feed source that is loaded with antibiotics or anything like that. It's literally supplemented with some minerals and it's got a product in it that will prevent your goats from getting urinary calculi and urinary calculi are little calcium deposits that build up in the urinary tract and eventually clog it.

And when that happens, your goats strain, particularly your boy goats because it most likely happens to them, they'll strain like they're having a baby but really, they have these stones and they're stuck in their urinary tract and they can't go to the bathroom and that can be lethal. In fact, it usually is because it's very expensive to do surgical procedures and things to resolve it, so a lot of times people end up processing goats that have urinary calculi if it's a bad case. For males,

because they're not producing milk, because they're not producing babies, and they're not always using all of the calcium that comes into their bodies through their food supply. Giving them a medicated feed is sometimes a really good option. Like I said, this is not antibiotic medications, this is urinary calculi medication just to prevent that condition so it's worth considering. But definitely do your research because anything that says medicine or medicated always makes me a little bit nervous.

Additionally, no matter what you feed them, in almost all circumstances, your goats are going to need some kind of mineral supplementation. The soil just is not as fully loaded with minerals at all times as we want it to be and so the food that comes out of it, all the plants that grow from the soil don't necessarily always have everything that a goat is going to need to be completely healthy. Also, we don't always give our goats exactly as much room as they'll need to go out and forage and find what they really need for the best nutrition. So, something that almost all goat owners, there might be some crazy exceptions, but generally all goat owners are going to need to offer some free-choice minerals to their goats. And these free-choice minerals, you basically buy them in 40- or 50-pound bags, they cost about \$20 and you just put out a bowl of them and the goats will eat them when they need them. There are more expensive kinds; you might get an eight-pound bag for \$10. Those -- they're a little bit more flavorful and so the goats tend to eat them more than they should, so with those kind of minerals, you really just have to sprinkle them on feed or just give a little bit a day rather than putting them out free-choice. You want to look for the minerals that aren't quite as appetizing to goats so they really just eat what they want.

In addition to minerals, baking soda is something that you also really want to think about keeping out for your goats. Baking soda is really quite harmless for them, but if they do eat the wrong things and they start to get a rumen imbalance, then they'll self-medicate by eating some baking soda and it just kind of smooths things out in their digestive system and keeps things regulated and you don't have to worry. Also, some people will leave Diatomaceous Earth, which is bentonite, it's a form of clay. That really depends on the feed you're giving them, so if you're giving them feed stocks that might contain mycotoxins, then it's probably a good idea to leave it out, but I'll tell you the truth, my goats were eating it like candy and again that's always a sign to me that I need to be cautious and so I personally have opted not to leave Diatomaceous Earth out for my goats to eat. But that's something worth considering depending on the kind of feed stocks that you're giving your goats.

There's some treats that you can give goats. One of my favorites is actually alfalfa pellets. You can buy a big bag of alfalfa pellets from the farm supply store for not too much and a handful of that is so exciting to the goats, but it's also good for them. You can actually buy goat treats which are basically -- they have a licorice flavor that really appeals to the goats and they also have some extra nutrition in it, but those are a little bit too expensive for me, so I don't typically use them. But banana peels if you happen to be a banana eater; goats really love your banana peels. Those are some simple treats that you can use particularly as your training them. They'll eat the bananas too, but they're just as happy with the peels.

There are a number of plants goats that can't eat. As long as goats as plenty of access to things that they can and should eat, they'll usually avoid any toxic substances all by themselves. Every once in awhile, though, particularly with my young kids, I'll get a goat that eats some mountain laurel because we have that everywhere here and there's no possible way, I can eradicate it from their pastures. So, when that happens, those little guys or girls, these kids, will get an upset stomach, they'll start foaming at the mouth a little bit and then they'll start shaking their heads and spewing nasty green stuff all over the place. This is like the equivalent of goat vomit and I freaked out the first time. I was like, "Oh my gosh. What's going on? Call the vet." I called the vet and he said to me, "Well, they're spitting it out right? They're spewing their cud?" and I was like, "Yes." And he's like, "Eh, just make sure they drink water." I was like, "What? That's it? This horrible experience and that's all there is to it?"

And it's happened multiple times now and so that seems to be -- as long as they only eat a small amount of a toxic substance, they tend to spew it and get over it, get it out of their system and you just need to make sure to keep them hydrated. Sometimes they develop a taste for it though and that's when you have to worry. It's when they start being able to tolerate things that they shouldn't eat and they'll start accumulating deposits of it and they can develop some serious health problems from it. So, what you really want is to make sure they have plenty of other good things to eat.

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Now the one exception, and I've heard this from many goat owners, is that if you have wild cherry trees in your pasture, you do want to remove those because for some reason wild cherry leaves are extremely tasty to goats and they will eat them and they are toxic particularly if they eat them multiple times. So that's the one thing that even if you offer lots of diverse pasture, you'll want to remove the temptation from your goats. Now depending on where you live, there may be other things that you have to be aware of; I will give you some lists, but for the most part though, really just making sure they have access to things that they can and should eat solves the problem of not having them eat toxic food stuff.

Goats also need fresh water and goats are pretty picky about their water. They don't like things floating in it, so if you can get them fused nipple feeders, that will keep the water clean. Otherwise just regular changing out of the water will work. During cold weather or any time that you are changing their diet or any time that they seem to be experiencing stress, I've had really good luck just adding a little bit of apple cider vinegar to their water. I'm not entirely sure why, but apple cider vinegar seems to sort of beef up their resistance in the same way it does humans when we're being bombarded with germs from other people's colds and stuff. So, a little bit of apple cider vinegar added to their water, like a tablespoon to a gallon, is a nice supplement. I particularly do that in winter because it really seems to help when they don't have access to as much fresh pasture.