WHY DO I WANT TO OWN A WORKING GOAT?

Have you asked yourself this question? Do you think that baby goats are cute and might be sort of fun to own? Have you thought hard about the responsibility of owning and caring for a goat? Now is the time to think about these questions before you rush out to buy a goat.

There are several types of 4-H goat projects. However, regardless of which project you choose, you can count on having to feed, water and check in on your goat at least twice each day. Yes, that’s right! In the middle of winter you will probably have to get up while it is still dark to take care of your goat before going off to school. After school you’ll need to count on doing your goat chores again as well as homework, any sports and social activities you like to do, and any other household chores you are responsible for. You’ll also need to clean your goat’s pen and shelter periodically and learn to trim your goat’s feet. Do you have the time and energy for a goat? It’s a good idea to talk to your family now about how you will arrange your time to care for a goat.

Another thing to check on before buying your goat is whether there are any local laws against having a goat on your property. If you cannot have a goat where you live, you may be able to lease a goat from a goat raiser to help care for it at their place. However, check first with your county extension office to find out under what conditions leasing is allowed by 4-H. You may also keep your goat on a friend’s farm, but make sure that both your families get along well and understand what your duties are and what actions will be taken if you do not take care of your goat. Even if there are no local laws against keeping a goat on your land, plan on putting your goat pen where it will not bother your neighbors. Goats can be very vocal at times and may attract flies in the summer, especially if you forget to clean their pen regularly. If you decide to get a goat, be sure to have housing, fencing and everything else ready before the goat comes home with you. You can hardly keep your goat in your bedroom!

If you and your family are sure that you have the time, energy, and place to care for a goat, the next question to ask yourself is what kind of a goat project do I want? Working Goat Projects generally involve training a goat to either carry packs (pack goat) or pull carts (harness or driving goat). Because you do not need to milk a working goat or breed them to get meat goat kids, castrated male goats (wethers) often make perfect working goats. The best wethers for these projects are generally raised with lots of human contact. You will generally get very attached to your goat as you work to build a relationship together as a hiking or driving team. Thus, you need to think hard about whether you can make the long term commitment to have a working goat and what you will do with your wether if you tire of him or go off to college and can no longer care for him. Female goats (does) that are not heavily pregnant or milking can also be used. Even a milking doe will sometimes work although you will have to take special care that her udder does not get injured.
Even though you will not need to milk your goat, you will still need to provide daily care and exercise for your working wether or doe just like you would for a dog. Goats are very social animals and often get very lonely (and loud!) if they do not have a companion. Unless someone else in your family has another goat or other livestock that can be housed with your goat, it often makes sense to plan on buying and raising two working goats rather than just one!

A goat needs to be about two years old before he is strong enough to carry a full pack or pull a cart. However, basic training starts at about 2 to 3 months of age. By one year of age, a goat can easily carry a soft pack with your lunch, spare jacket, and water in it and accompany you hiking. It usually takes two people to train a driving goat so make sure you have a friend or family member who is willing to commit to helping you out. You should also plan on having to spend money buying packing and driving equipment. Be sure to check out the price of necessary equipment in various catalogs before you buy your goat. There are plans available for making your own soft packs, driving carts and even harnesses. Check to see if you can try out equipment for up to 3 months through NYS 4-H Working Goat Program.

A pack goat project will help you become more familiar with the outdoors as you enjoying hiking, packing and being out in nature with your goat. There are many trails that can be hiked with goats. Pack goats can even be used to carry out garbage from along shorelines and roadsides or to help you carry tools and other equipment while doing farm chores or other tasks. Soft packs can be made or purchased fairly inexpensively. However, larger packs or the rigid packs used for heavier packing can be much more expensive.

A driving goat project also provides opportunities to use your goat in several ways. You can train your goat to pull sleds or stoneboats along the ground to help you haul firewood and feed. The harnesses used for these purposes are generally not very expensive and can also be handmade using discarded seat belts and other strong nylon fabric. However, if you are going to train your goat as a harness goat driving you in a cart, keep in mind that these harnesses and carts are usually much more expensive. This sport also requires you to have safe, fairly flat smooth paths for you and your goat to train and practice on. Teaching your goat to pull a 4 wheel wagon can usually be done on rougher ground.

Unless your family is planning to have an individual membership in 4-H where your parents act as your 4-H leaders, it is important to make sure there is a 4-H group and leader in your county able to take on your project before you go out and buy an animal. For example, if there is a dairy or meat goat project in your county, check with them to see if working goats will also fit into the activities of their 4-H group. Now that you’ve thought more about why you would like to own a goat, here are some activities to help you decide if a goat is really for you.

**Suggested Activities**

1) Find out what local laws might affect your decision to own a goat.

2) Volunteer to help a friend who owns a goat or a nearby goat raiser with their goat chores one morning or evening (even Cloverbuds can do this one if accompanied by a responsible adult!).

3) Make a chart of your daily schedule and add to it a list of your anticipated goat chores and the times you would do them at.

4) Locate an owner of a pack or driving goat and ask them if you can tag along while they go for a hike or work with their goat.