

# ORGANIC MEAT GOAT PRODUCTION

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## ***Transitioning From “Traditional” to Organic Meat Goat Production***

I would like to preface this discussion by stating that I did not have to work at a transition for my goat herd. I started with organic meat production from the beginning. As a naturopathic doctor I understand the problems that arise in human and animal health when chemicals are relied upon in food and in health care. Also as a person who suffered from a form of Lupus, the need to stay far away from additives in my own food and the complications that can arise for me in handling chemicals, it was important to me to be able to provide food for myself and my family, and ultimately to the open market, without concern for killing myself in the process. That said, I have assisted many goat producers across the nation in transitioning their herds from traditional production methods to organic. All have thus far been successful and several have exclusive contracts with major organic food store chains.

I thought it most humorous when one producer who contacted me for assistance wanted assurances that the animals he saw in the photos on my web site were indeed naturally raised and not photos of other peoples' animals. This could be considered almost a rude statement on the surface, but, listening further brought in the humor for me. It seems his extension service agent informed him that the way to start raising goats organically was to dig a very big hole as it would be quickly filled with the bodies of his dying herd. His agent was absolutely convinced that there was no way on this earth that a goat could be raised to maturity and encouraged to reproduce without a great deal of chemical intervention.

It's a shame that such attitudes prevail, and I happily assist anyone with learning that changing methods can indeed be done successfully. When you consider the facts of goats it is obvious that they have survived thousands of years prior to the invention of vaccines, chemical dewormers, drugs, etc. Goats have been developed in some of the harshest environments known to man based only on what nature provides for them. Taking lessons from nature is the first step to moving any livestock or food production method to natural.

Nature herself culls the weak and provides nutritious plants that serve all the needs of the animals that reside on the planet. It's when we take those animals into a farm or ranch situation that we mess a bit with that natural plan. So the best place to start your transition is by learning about goats in a more natural setting. We know that goats are browsers, tending to nibble here and there on a wide variety of plants from grasses to leafy plants to brush and small trees. We know that goats like to wander around while they eat, unlike horses and cows that we see standing in one small area while they chew the grasses to the ground level. We know that some of these plants have constituents that are natural dewormers, natural mineral providers, natural pain relievers, natural antibiotics, etc. Knowing these basic facts, we can provide the same to our meat and dairy goats in a more natural setting that enables us to work with nature, not against it.

Why would you want to transition your goats to organic? There are as many different reasons as there are producers, but a few advantages include better herd health, better herd longevity and

production, a ready niche market for naturally raised meats, and undertaken properly it can actually reduce the expenses for your herd. Some of the disadvantages include needing to spend a little more time observing your livestock, field/browse area preparation, and taking the time to learn a new way of doing things. In my experience the advantages have far outweighed the disadvantages, not only in my own operation but also in those I have helped to make the transition.

With nature as the starting point, those of you with adequate pasture and browse areas can start transitioning your goat herd to natural production by merely observing your animals regularly. If you have delicate type stock that is used to being micromanaged it will take a while to fully transition. Goats that have been born to the world of chemicals may have some problems that will need to be tended to, such as trouble with parasite loads, easily picking up illnesses, learning to eat what is available, etc. Culling cannot be underemphasized – those goats that do very poorly through the transition period need to be removed from your herd. Keep only those that are adapting well. They will be the producers of your organic generations to come.

Animals easily adapt to their environments when we don't interfere too much. I think sometimes in our quest to produce all we can to improve the bottom line we forget that some of our modern inventions may actually be harming our bottom line in the long run. The goat that needs constant chemical worming is not a healthy goat, no matter what it looks like on the outside. The goat that consistently produces kids with problems is not a healthy goat regardless of what you are feeding it. The goat that does not thrive on what nature can provide is not a healthy goat. Many a producer has commented to me that after stopping chemical usage, many goats that they had marked for culling ended up improving greatly and remained in their herds. So the problem may not be that the goat is susceptible to worms or disease, it may well be that the chemicals and questionable or overly rich feed given to that animal for prevention are doing more harm than good.

This is not to say that you should not step in with modern chemicals if the need truly arises. I certainly do. However, any goat that required that sort of intervention is generally not going to stay in my herd, or she or her kids are not going to be sold as organically raised goats. You will most likely find, however, that once you get the hang of observing your goats for problems and nipping them in the backside before it gets to the need for drugs, you will be intervening far less than you have ever had to in the past.

The second thing you need to do to transition your goats to organic production is to learn to see what your goats need to be healthy. Mineral deficiencies can create problems for your herd. If you live in an area where the soil is poor, or lacking in important items such as selenium or copper, you will need to provide free choice mineral mixes formulated for your area. Lack of botanical variety in your pasture and browse areas, or in the type of hay you provide, can create nutritional deficiencies that result in poor reproductive rates, low birth rate kids, low survivability of kids, and susceptibility to illness. Learn what a healthy goat should look like, and measure your herd against that basic standard. Make adjustments to their diets accordingly.

If your botanical variety is lacking it would an important thing for you to augment that area for your goats. When modern farming methods came along we stopped doing some of the things that worked a while ago before we had these giant tractors and special crops. Remember in the days of your youth (or your parents' youth for those of you younger farmers!) when each field was surrounded by hedgerows and shelterbelts? Remember when productive fields were surrounded by areas that were

never plowed? Remember when all farmers and ranchers practiced field and pasture rotation? When preparing your land to transition your goats is the perfect time to return to some of those older methods – they worked then and they still work now.

Separate your pasture and grazing areas into smaller areas that you can shift your goats through regularly. Preferably have some areas that can be left alone for at least an entire year. In these areas, plant edible bushes, small trees, large trees, medicinal plants, edible wildflowers, grass varieties, etc. Give these time to establish before allowing goats to return and browse. Put in hedgerows and shelterbelts around your property lines and field separating fences, and occasionally allow the herd access to these areas. Hedgerows can be beautiful to look at as well as quite functional for feed and field protection, and you will find that the wildlife will appreciate your efforts, such as pheasant, quail, songbirds, beneficial insects, etc. and these areas may increase the value of your property. Remember the more variety you can provide, the less work you as the producer have to do to keep your herd healthy, happy, and productive.

If you are feeding in pens either seasonally or through the year, you need to pay close attention to what you are feeding them. The pellets in a sack contain things you may not want in your organic goats. And usually these foods are too rich, or they are not nearly as “complete” as they may be advertised to be. Buy the best hay you can afford during breeding times and kidding times, as the better nutrition will lessen the chances of ketosis and the odd problems such as fescue poisoning. Supplement with fresh stuff you have around – goats love treats of non-toxic fresh weeds (dandelion leaves are a special joy!), prunings from safe trees and bushes, and plants you pull out of your gardens. Just remember to not give them any plants from the nightshade family as they are toxic, and to not give food items that have been treated with any chemicals or may be growing near a busy road. If you prefer to grain at kidding time, make sure it is a natural mixture of grains with no additives. Your feed provider can usually hook you up with some organic sources of grains.

Supplemental minerals are important all the time, but most important if you are pen raising, if you are in a drought situation, or if your browse or hay is questionable in nutritional content. I feed my herd a natural mineral mix, combined with kelp and diatomaceous earth, offered free choice in PVC pipe feeders year round. I know the arguments regarding DE, and I won't cover them here, but I will point out that DE is used by organic food producers to kill pest insects on plants, and I will point out that DE is also high in trace mineral content that often isn't included in general goat mixes. It has kept my fly population down, and I have used it when I was an organic vegetable producer and still use it on my own organic food plots, which are shared with the goats.

Parasites are always a big topic of discussion with goat producers, and the number one area of concern for those who wish to go organic but have been told otherwise by those who believe only chemicals get rid of parasites. There is a tendency in goat production to over-deworm – reading any internet list will provide evidence of this. Most questions related to a goat with a problem are always replied to by several suggesting that the goat has not been sufficiently wormed. First, a healthy goat is going to be resistant to parasite load. Second, all afflictions of our goats are not caused by worms. Parasites are opportunistic, taking any opportunity afforded them to take hold within any host animal, including humans. Stress, lack of proper nutrition, severe weather, and environment are some prime opportunities for parasites to thrive within our goats. Our goal in natural goat production is to eliminate or manage carefully those triggers.

Breeding for resistance to parasites would be very important here. Starting with hardy stock that is adapted to your current property is a vital first step. Remember, goats are highly adaptable overall, so your goal should be to cull those that seem to be constantly parasite loaded, and to breed those who are already showing a resistance so that their kids will develop further resistance. Introducing them to natural dewormers is the second step. There are many anthelmintic plants in the botanical world – that word simply means that active constituents within the plant either kill worms and their larvae and/or helps create an inhospitable environment for the parasite to remain in.

The biggest mistake I see most producers making when they move to natural production is attempting to rely on only one type of natural dewormer for their herd. One dose does not fit all, and one plant does not fit every situation. As in healing and treating illness, deworming should be done with combinations of plants, and those combinations should match the situation. For example, I use one combination in early spring when parasites are just starting to get active again. I use a different combination when the weather has been especially wet, and a different combination as parasites increase activity in their life cycles. I use a different combination for those animals that have just been brought to the farm for replacement stock, and a different combination for those animals that have undergone a period of stress, such as kidding, fighting, predator problems, etc. I've learned to match my dewormers to the herd itself, and in so doing have eliminated the need for constant worming. These deworming formulas are offered to the goats free choice as well as in their drinking water when the need arises. If I've just had a large group of does kid, for example, I will put a mixture into their drinking water for a few days. I've never had any goat refuse water that had natural dewormers nor medicinal herbs included. There will be further discussion of natural dewormers in my afternoon session on medicinal herbs for goats.

Incidences of illness will be far less once you have transitioned your herd to organic. Again, a healthy goat is a hardy goat, and when they are getting the nutrients they need to remain healthy the opportunity for illness to take over is greatly reduced. Weather can have an impact on illness as can bringing in outside stock, no matter how healthy the herd. These would be times to be especially vigilant, and administer medicinal plants to the goats when the need arises. A watchful producer can tell when a doe or buck or kid seems a little “off” – instead of waiting to see what develops and reaching for a syringe full of the drug of the day, that would be the time to administer some helpful medicinal plants, not just to the goat looking “off” but to all goats in that area, pen, pasture, etc.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of isolating new stock from your herd! Introducing new stock is a major way to spread disease through your goats, and the easiest to control. All new stock should be quarantined for a period of time before introduction to your existing herd. Many recommend two weeks, though my personal preference is 60 to 90 days. Moving a goat from one farm to another can cause enough stress for any underlying problem to surface, and the further that distance, the more stressed that animal has been. That particular goat may be harboring something that it picked up that is just waiting for the right opportunity to attack the goat's vital systems. It is far better for the problem to surface in an isolation pen than it is in the midst of your herd. While in isolation the goat should be carefully observed for any signs of problems. The moment a sign appears, that goat should be treated accordingly. This is a good time to introduce the new stock to natural dewormers, new feed, new supplements, etc. so that they are well adjusted by the time they are turned in with the main herd.

Please note here that there is a very big difference between “homeopathic” treatments and “medicinal herb” treatments. Many people who have no training confuse the two. Homeopathy is the

principle of like treating like. For instance, if you have a particular ailment you may take a homeopathic treatment that is made from the essence of that ailment. “Homeopathic” is often mistaken by many people to mean “home remedy” because of the sound of the term. Homeopathic medicine is a field unto itself, and does not involve “home remedies”. Medicinal herbs are just that – plants that grow and are used for medicine. Most of the drugs on the market today are derived from medicinal plants! There will be more information on medicinal herb use in the afternoon session.

There are a few pitfalls to avoid when transitioning to organic production. One would be giving up too soon. I’ve seen folks try to make the transition without being fully prepared to guide the herd through the transition and give up as soon as a goat or two got the sniffles. The only way these animals are going to build an immunity to what is in their immediate environment is to allow their immune systems to deal with what is there. Give it time. Certainly if a goat is in trouble you should act accordingly! But don’t feel that if all the goats aren’t thriving without dewormer in a couple of weeks that your attempt has failed.

Another pitfall would be not culling your herd to match your ultimate goals, or buying hardy stock to help you reach those goals. If a goat does not thrive without a lot of chemical intervention, it should be culled. If a goat seems to always be sickly while all around it do quite well, that goat should be culled. If a goat seems to be continually wormy no matter how often she hits the natural dewormers, that goat needs to be culled. If you are out shopping for fresh stock to add to your gene pool, select not for what animal looks the meatiest after eating the latest “superfood”, select for health and vigor on average input. Some genetic lines in all goat breeds just don’t do well in any setting, and there is no sense in spending dollars in the way of medicines and special feeds just to try to make a “pretty goat” healthy enough to give you more mediocre stock.

The biggest pitfall is in not observing your stock. You don’t need to hang out with them all day every day, but you do need to spend enough time each day to learn personalities, eating habits, drinking habits, and how they look on an average day. That way you can jump right in with appropriate measures if a goat is not looking quite right, or looks fine but has gone off feed, or is hanging off by itself. We all know how well goats can hide the fact that they may not be feeling well, which is of course Nature’s way of not drawing predators to the herd. Observation of the daily habits of your herd will teach you more than any book, mentor, or course could ever teach.

In conclusion, it is quite possible and not terribly complicated to transition your herd from traditional cattle-type production methods to natural goat production. All it takes from you is a bit of education, a good eye, a steady bit of nerves, and a dose of patience. Let them be the goats that nature intended and you will be rewarded with vigorous animals that reproduce well and often.

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