

Goats

Teagasc Advisory Factsheet



Introduction

The image of the goat has undergone a transformation in recent years. Consumer knowledge of production values has increased exponentially and has fuelled a demand for healthy, quality products such as goats' milk and cheeses. Goats' milk has long been associated with certain health benefits, particularly in the case of asthma and eczema. However due to its chemical and physical properties, it is also much more readily digestible by the human body. Goats' cheese, rarely found on menus twenty years ago, has become a firm favourite with the Irish palate and is now commonplace in restaurants. Yoghurts, ice cream and even cosmetics can all be made from goats' milk. Changes in the ethnic makeup of our population, as well as an emphasis on healthy food options, have led to a demand for goats' meat. Did you know that goats' meat contains less calories, fat and cholesterol than all other common meats, including chicken! Even their fleece can be made into clothing and their hides in bodhráns. Their small size coupled with this huge versatility makes them suitable for even the smallest of holdings.

Establishing a Goat Herd

1. Before investing in any goat enterprise it is vitally important to establish a secure steady outlet for your product. Without an outlet there is little point in starting goat farming.
2. Contact your local District Veterinary Office regarding a herd number. Remember goats are subject to the same rules as sheep regarding identification and need a green tag in each ear.
3. Visit a number of existing well run goat farms by appointment and ideally work on one of them.
4. Complete a 25-Hour Goat Production Course.
5. Ensure you purchase only healthy goats from reputable healthy herds.
6. Complete a farm plan and a business plan.

What will I produce?

What you produce will largely depend on the area of land and facilities you have available and also the time you have to commit to your new enterprise. Milking goats is much more labour intensive and time consuming than meat production. However, adding value to your milk such as through cheese production makes smaller holdings more viable.

Milk

In Ireland goats' milk is primarily supplied to Glenisk or to cheese makers. The aim should be to achieve a yield of 1,000 litres per 300 day lactation. It is therefore vital to obtain and produce top quality animals as this will have a substantial influence on profitability. Most processors require a steady supply of milk all year round and since goats are seasonal breeders this requires manipulation of the breeding season. However, prices of 70 cents per litre are achievable where supply is correctly managed.



Cheese

The market for Irish goats' cheese is expanding all the time and new varieties are constantly finding their way onto supermarket shelves. Cheese production can be done through a partnership with an existing producer or by the farmer themselves. This is a highly skilled process and suitable training is vital before commencing production. Complete a cheese making course and visit other cheese makers to get their expertise and experience.

Meat

The market for meat in Ireland is still quite small but virtually every ethnic group worldwide eats goats' meat. Each group has their own preference for type and size of animal so do your research and secure your outlet before investing. Dairy-type goats are widely available but difficult to fatten; meat-type goats (typically Boer or their crosses) are rarer but have been developed for weight gain and carcass conformation and are therefore more suited to meat production. Prices of in excess of €5.00 per kilo carcass weight are achievable and higher through processing and adding value.

Other products

Liquid milk, ice-cream, yoghurt and confectionary are all produced from goats' milk in Ireland. Contact existing suppliers to discuss production and ideally visit to see their operation. There are also a few cosmetic producers using goat milk in the production of soaps and creams, effective against skin conditions such as eczema. Production of clothing from fibre goats is possible in Ireland but typically our climate makes this difficult.



Housing and Facilities

Contrary to common opinion, domestic goats are not at all like their feral Irish relations. Their coats are not waterproof and they have little subcutaneous fat to protect them from the cold. Therefore shelter must be provided at all times to allow them to escape the elements. They are also browsers rather than grazers and can be susceptible to parasites. Most agricultural buildings are suitable for housing goats but they must be dry and free from draughts, though simple shelters like pig arcs can also work well. Plans for goat housing and facilities can be obtained from Teagasc and most of the major milking machine companies provide milking facilities specifically designed for goats.

Training Courses for Goats

Teagasc run a 25-hour course in Goat Production and a number of privately run courses are also available. It is also advisable that potential goat stockpersons should work for a period in an existing well run commercial goat unit.

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