A Guide to Breeding Goats

Plus, What to Expect During Rut!

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Questions About Breeding Goats
From Kat’s Caprine Corner

Q: How do I know if my doelings are ready to breed?

A: I want my standard-sized doelings to be: At least 80 pounds with weight appropriate for frame size, gaining weight, healthy, sound (no lameness), and at least seven months old. I also want them to have sufficient bone size (medium to large bone). Frail-boned animals, which some people mistake for “really dairy,” may have to be kept over as a dry yearling, as their frame won’t be able to store enough minerals to support a pregnancy. Those are the animals that turn under at the rear pasterns as they demineralize late in gestation or early into their milk careers. Keeping them as dry yearlings, to me, wastes a year of feed and production so I culled those out over a decade ago. For mini breeds, please consult a mini breeder as to weights, but the other parameters are the same.

Q: How can I tell if my doe is in heat?

A: The easiest way is to have a buck sharing a fence line with a chain link, cattle, or horse panels in between them and the does. The does will usually hang out with the bucks, teasing them. They may be rubbing on the fence, flagging their tails, squatting and peeing, and/or are extra noisy. They may be hard to catch to bring into the milk room. Their vulvae may be pink or swollen, and you may catch a clear string of mucus hanging from the vulva. Any or all of these usually indicate heat. If you do not have a buck around, see if you can purchase a large dog collar with a plastic fastener and have the buck owner put that on their buck for a day or two. Then bring the rank collar home. Usually your does will flag for that. Sometimes doelings, or older does that are mineral deficient, will exhibit weak or quiet heats. For those, we use herbs in the product called CyclEaze. As long as they are otherwise healthy, this usually brings on an easy-to-notice heat.
Q: How often should my doe cycle?

A: Usually every 19 to 21 days, although some goats fall out of this range. The first heat of the year may “short cycle” and be repeated about five days later with what is the real heat. That is one reason we try not to breed on a first heat, but can and then if they recycle in five days we breed again. If they short cycle again, we recognize that we may have an egg stuck (cystic ovary), a hormonal imbalance (may go along with a stuck egg), or toxic reproduction organs. In those cases, you may seek medical or alternative health assistance in cleaning and rebalancing those organs. They may also have a uterine infection brewing, in which case you need to clear that up before breeding.

Q: What is a buck rag and how do I make one?

A: A buck rag is literally a rag that has been rubbed over a “ripe” buck to impart his odor. This rag, in theory, is then held around does that don’t live near a buck to try to catch does in heat. I’ve been told that sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. The most fail-safe method I’ve heard is one that Lauren Acton, DVM has mentioned. She puts a collar on a really ripe buck for a few days. This “buck-saturated” collar is more likely to have a doe respond appropriately with heat signals.

Q: My sister has a goat which seems to be in heat for a whole week now but will not let a buck breed her.

A: If your doe has been in heat for longer than about three days, she may have a reproductive organ issue causing a hormonal imbalance. Consider a possible uterine infection, reproductive organ toxicity including the liver and kidneys, or a simple hormonal imbalance. If you are unable to solve the issue soon, get a diagnosis from a vet.

Q: My buck seems to be low on stamina so he has a hard time breeding. Are there things I can do?

A: Assuming he is otherwise healthy, I mix cayenne with a bit of blackstrap molasses (not the feed store high-sugar garbage) and drench with that. I use 1/2 teaspoon for senior bucks of standard breed size — cut those in half to 1/3 for mini bucks. He should regain some strength quickly! Also make sure he is weight appropriate (late summer I feed my bucks more to get a bit of excess weight on them, knowing they are going to pace it back off), his parasite program is up to date, and that he doesn’t have any underlying infections including walking pneumonia. Also check his “running gear” to be sure that those parts are clean and appear healthy.

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Have a question for Kat’s Caprine Corner? Send it to us at goatjournal@gmail.com.
Q: How do I keep weight on my buck while in rut?

A: Here are some things I do to minimize weight loss in my bucks. First, I try to have my bucks start breeding season a bit overweight and on the gain. I like about a 3/4 inch pinch on the barrel behind the elbow area. We also try to breed our does as close together as we can to finish our breeding season sooner. When the does are no longer cycling, the bucks tend to quit pacing and usually eat better. I also make sure that I have excellent-quality feed for them. To me, that is sprouted grain, in the right quantity for each buck to have him slightly gaining, along with excellent-quality alfalfa hay and grass hay. My bucks get all of the grass hay they can eat and an alfalfa flake in the morning and another in the evening, as well as access to their kelp and plant minerals. My bucks are on this program all year long, not just a few weeks before breeding season. Bucks also ideally should have proper housing. That means a roof over their heads and walls to prevent any wind from hitting them, but still having air movement overhead to whisk away any urine smells. It also means fresh, deep bedding that is dry to hunker down into. Bucks that are aged or extra thin may require a goat coat during the day or night. They may even require two at times. Bucks in this condition will also appreciate a small warm water bucket with a 1/4 teaspoon of cayenne dropped in it to help warm their cores. Olive oil, starting in small increments such as a tablespoon (less for mini breeds) and taking two or three weeks to work up to 1/4 cup once or twice a day, on their grain, will provide additional fats and calories if needed.

Q: Can I breed a buck back to his siblings if those babies are only for food?

A: Most goat breeders do not recommend full-sibling breedings. Half-sibling breedings are sometimes considered if you have a strong understanding of every animal in the pedigree for at least three generations. This type of breeding exponentially increases the chances of having very undesirable traits, such as small stature, loss of reproductivity, and poor gains, so it would be to your benefit to look for another less related buck to use.

Q: When is the best time for fall breeding?

A: This depends on where you live and what types of goats you have. Nubian and Nigerian Dwarf goats tend to be breedable year round, while the Swiss and LaMancha breeds tend to be seasonal. The further north you are, in general, the later your breeding is. For instance, breeders in the very southern part of the U.S. tend to start breeding in August and are often finished around early October. Those of us further north tend to start breeding around September and are usually finished in early November. I find that I can count on my goats (LaManchas and Toggs when I had them) having good cycles for October and November breedings. My September breedings tend to produce fewer kids and I can’t count on goats ovulating into December or January, although some do. The latest kids I have had have been July (February breeding), but that is generally out of the normal range. Kids born from April on don’t tend to grow as fast per month as kids born earlier, so we try to have ours done by the first week of April.
Q: Should I hand breed or pen/pasture breed?

A: My personal preference is a combination, but everyone will have their own preferences. I do not pasture breed during our regular breeding season. One, I don’t want to risk a rare but possible challenge by a buck with a doe in heat. Two, I would have no fence to protect me from our overly friendly buck, so I’m going to be rubbed on by Mr. Wet and Odiferous. Three, they can become lazy and, if you are doing outside breedings and the does aren’t perfectly receptive, they may not perform. And four, they will over-breed your does, which will waste semen, use up more of his energy at a time when it’s harder to keep weight on them, strain a doe or doeling’s back, as well as could cause tenderness in your doe or on him. I also want to know when each doe is bred for potential kidding dates and some breedings will be missed this way. I prefer to pen breed with my buck collared and me in the pen to assist if needed. That may be to hold back an overly aggressive buck with an insecure doe(ling), or to keep a doe from walking out from under the buck, or to let a doe out quickly that clearly is not ready. I (female) do not enter buck pens by myself. Usually my husband works with the breeding and only goes in a buck pen when there is a doe in there to distract him. After all, this time of year they usually only have breeding on the brain. Once I have gone three weeks without any breeding, I will select one buck to be my “clean-up” buck and turn him loose with the does, to catch any that may have re-absorbed or not bred.

Q: What are other ways to breed?

A: How you breed your bucks is up to you and your management, but here are some choices to filter through. Do keep a calendar where you can write down every breeding that you notice. We keep two — one in the barn and a second backup one in the house in case the one in the barn gets destroyed (a fast grab from a doe in the milk room can destroy records quickly). We typically hand breed, where the doe is led up to the buck in a pen or the barn aisle where we watch the breeding and remove the doe a couple of minutes after breeding to put her away. This way, we know for sure when she was bred so we can get a better idea of due dates. The other form of live breeding is pasture breeding. It is easier on the herd-keeper in that one buck is in a group of does in a pen or pasture and lives with them full time, but it is harder to catch when does are bred for your due date planning. I practice this at the end of my breeding season, waiting 14 days past the last hand breeding so I have no way to mix up who the sire of the next year’s kids are. This is called having a “clean-up” buck. My clean-up buck’s name and dates are also clearly marked on my calendar. The reason I do this at the end of our breeding season is to catch any does that reabsorbed their pregnancies or didn’t take on a previous breeding. This lessens my chance of any dry does the following spring. I just make sure that I use a buck that is a gentleman, as I don’t want first trimester does running around. I also make sure that any does that need to be dry for the following year, or any too closely related, are not in that pen or pasture when I put the buck back in.

Q: Is there a shot that can be given to control the time of year that goats will kid?

A: To encourage goats to breed out of season, breeders may use CIDRs, which they insert vaginally and then remove several days later. To stack the deck, some breeders or dairies will also put their soon-to-be-bred out-of-season goats under lighting to increase the daylight hours they are under for spring breedings, then cut them back rapidly after a few weeks to encourage the pituitary gland into thinking fall and breeding season has arrived.

None of these are fail-safe, but they do greatly increase the opportunity to get a doe to cycle and ovulate out of season. I also encourage people to use our CyclEaze herb mix with their unbred animals to encourage heat and ovulation if needed.
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As I was photographing my goats the other day, I noticed an unmistakable sign. Our buck is entering rut. As he took me through his tricks that will hopefully entice the ladies to join him, I caught a whiff of the buck’s musky odor. Once you smell this perfume, you won’t ever forget it! What, exactly, is going on in the goat barn in the fall? Even if you aren’t planning to breed this year, signs of estrus and the male going into rut are happening anyway.

Understanding the cycles of your does, and the buck’s behavior in response, is of high importance for responsible breeding. If you are already conducting a breeding program on your farm, those kids from late winter and early fall are more than capable of impregnating any does within reach. Even bucklings, as young as three months, can manage to successfully breed with a doe. One year, I was slow to remove a young buckling from the group. Guess what? We had a bumper crop of goat kids the next spring.
If you are going to keep an intact buck from a crop of kids, make sure you move him to a separate area before three months of age. If you have wethers (neutered males), they make great stall or field mates for an intact male. Watch for any aggression and adjust based on temperaments. During rut, it is common to see males mounting each other. The does might also be seen doing this during heat. Barnyard life sure can get interesting!

**Signs of Estrus or Heat in Does**

Many goat breeds are seasonal breeders. This includes many dairy and fiber goats. These breeds show signs of heat as the days shorten and fall approaches. The breeding season can last from August to January in these fall breeders. During the breeding season, does will come into heat every 18 to 21 days. Ovulation occurs near the end of the cycle. The length of a doe’s heat is specific to her and can last hours to a few days. Does will continue to cycle until they die. Don’t make the mistake of housing older does with the young males, as they can still be successfully bred, even if they aren’t in great physical condition.

Does will show signs of heat as they start a cycle. Frequent urination, less interest in food, tail wagging, vocalizing, lip and tongue blubbering are a few common signs. If you have a milking doe, she may have a drop in milk production or be more irritable about being milked.

Bucks, in rut, are a remarkable sight! They call loudly, blubber, and curl their upper lips, a condition called flehmen. The scent glands in their foreheads exude a pungent, unmistakable scent, which they are so happy to rub on you or any stationary object. In addition, they will spray or stream urine onto their faces and bellies, and even spray urine into their own mouths. These boys are just making themselves attractive for the does!

Care should be taken when handling both the doe and the buck during breeding season, as both can be very unpredictable. People unfamiliar with goats, and particularly buck behavior, should not be handling the bucks now, especially large breeds.

**Breeding Your Goats**

When conducting a breeding program, you have two options if you keep a buck. One is to allow the buck to run with the herd for the breeding season. A buck that has full-time access to the does is much more successful at breeding.

Another breeding method is to take the buck to the doe a few times over her cycle. The buck is led into the breeding area and led out after the breeding act takes place. This is repeated until the doe refuses to be mounted.

Artificial insemination is a third possibility. The percentage of successful breeding is lower, at approximately 60 to 65 percent conception. Using this method, you won’t need to keep a buck on site.

**Gestation**

Goat pregnancy lasts 145 to 155 days and varies by breed and the doe’s age. As the last few weeks of gestation approach, it is a good idea to house your does in the special area you have for delivery, unless you practice field deliveries. Many goat breeders set up that are disinfected, draft-free and bedded with straw. Some breeders will clip hair from the udder, vulva, and tail area. Having the vet’s phone number posted is a good idea for emergency questions during delivery.

As kidding approaches, each doe will react differently. Get to know your doe’s unique signals that her kidding is imminent. Common to most pregnant does is a softening of the tail ligaments at the base of the spine, staying by herself, mucus from the vulva, pawing the ground, and possibly biting at her side and talking to her babies. When actual delivery begins, it is usually over quickly. Congratulations! You are now officially on your way in the world of goat breeding.

**Reasons to Breed Goats**

Dairy goats require breeding for the does to freshen and continue to provide milk. Without a yearly breeding program for your does, your family milk supply will dry up as the kid matures and stops nursing.

Improving the breed is another good reason to conduct a breeding program. Breeders who seek to improve and further the breed are sought after by people looking to add to their flock.

Have customers ready to purchase the kids. Breeding just to have more goats can quickly get out of control. Remember, adding to your herd can become expensive. If you cannot sell the kids and you cannot afford to keep them, the other alternative is using them as a source of meat for your family.

Knowing what to look for in the fall breeding behavior can save you from unwanted animals. Or it can give you the advantage of setting up your breeding program and having more control over the outcome.

Janet Garman writes for Goat Journal, Backyard Poultry Magazine, and Countryside & Small Stock Journal. Though her farm is also home to sheep, pigs, and many species of poultry, she raises Pygora goats for fiber and sells yarn on Etsy under Timber Creek Farm.
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