

Preparing for Breeding Season *by Marilyn Grossman*

Make life easier for yourself. Plan ahead. The success of your breeding plan will affect your kidding season and your milk supply for the upcoming year.

Getting Your Does Bred

Before having your doe serviced, make sure she is in top physical condition. Does should be gaining weight for about 3 weeks both before and after breeding. They will have stronger, more detectable heat cycles and produce more ova, thus more kids. Two normal sized kids are considerably easier to deliver than is one large kid. Also, a doe will produce more milk in the ensuing lactation when she has 2 or 3 kids than when she singles. She should have a shiny coat, bright eyes, and be energetic. Trim her feet often as breeding season is one of the most active times of year.

The presence of a vigorous buck inspires does to cycle earlier in the season, and makes heat cycles easier to detect. If you do not have a buck, you can use a buck rag to help you detect when your doe is in heat. Just take a rag and rub it over a ruddy buck's head and genitals, and place it in an airtight container, such as a coffee can. Twice a day, as you feed your doe, you can open the can and let her smell it. She will let you know when the smell becomes interesting. I once had a doe grab the rag in her teeth and take off running gleefully through the pasture!

The typical heat cycle in dairy goats is 18-21 days, September through February. Signs of heat are: swollen, red vulva, clear mucous discharge, rapid tail wagging (called flagging), riding other goats, increased frequency of urination, decreased appetite and/or milk production, and being more vocal than usual. Standing heat is usually about 24 hours. Cycles differ from individual to individual. Some does can be in a standing heat as long as 2-3 days. Breeding in the beginning of standing heat increases the chances of doe kids, and breeding at the end of the cycle increases the chances of buck kids. Sometimes the first heat of the season is not a fertile heat, and the doe will cycle again in 5-7 days. This short cycling is only a concern if the short cycling persists. It is best to track your doe's cycle to determine what is normal for her. It is only when the cycles differ cycle to cycle that you should be concerned. Problem breeders, evidenced by silent heat, short cycles, or returning to heat after service, can be the result of a variety of causes. These causes include poor nutrition, mineral deficiencies, uterine infection from a previous kidding, worm infestation, and cystic ovaries.

Does should be wormed with an effective broad-spectrum wormer 30 days prior to breeding. Be careful not to under-dose with the wormer. Under-dosing only kills off the weak worms and creates a paradise for the stronger, more virulent worms.

If you live in a selenium deficient area of the country, give your does Bo-Se 30 days prior to breeding. Symptoms of selenium deficiency are: lower conception rates, weak heats, bucks slow to breed and lower motility in the sperm, retained placenta, weak kids that "knuckle under" on their pasterns or hocks, and susceptibility to infectious diseases such as mastitis. Selenium is toxic if overdosed. It is a controlled substance and must be purchased through a licensed veterinarian.

Don't Forget Your Buck

Buck health is equally important to doe health. Make sure your buck is in good weight prior to breeding season. Most bucks worry and tend to lose weight during rut. Feed him higher quality feeds during rut as he is likely to consume less. Keep a good quality free choice mineral available throughout breeding season as well. Worm him 30 days before breeding begins. If you live in a selenium deficient area, give him Bo-Se about 6-8 weeks before breeding begins. Make sure your buck's feet are properly trimmed so that he will be agile throughout breeding season.

Check your pens and fences for sturdiness. Facilities that held the buck all summer long tend to become inadequate when love is in the air. Exercise more caution around bucks who are in rut. They don't necessarily need to intend injury to cause injury. Remember that during rut, bucks live in a perpetual state of anxiety, and are not the easy-going guys they were in June.

Watch for urine scald on your buck's front legs. From continual spraying on his front legs, the hair can fall out and the skin become inflamed. If this happens, I find that coating the legs with Vaseline to repel urine goes a long way in helping the skin heal.

Most of all, remember to love your buck. He's the future of your herd and deserves your attention and your respect.

Plan for Milk Supply

Carefully select the order in which you will breed your does to maintain a year round supply of milk. Those that are milking the heaviest, or does with a history of a long, level lactation, should be bred last. Breeding to kid over a minimum of a 3 month period ensures your family a continuous supply of milk. It allows for proper dry periods and gives the newly fresh does a few weeks to develop pleasant tasting milk. Does should be dry for a 60 day period to allow for proper rest. Too short of a dry period inhibits milk production in the next lactation. Too long of a dry period allows a doe to retain excess flesh and increases the likelihood of pregnancy toxemia and other problems at kidding time. I have found that the length of a doe's first lactation sets a pattern for future lactations. It is important to milk first fresheners a full 305 so that she will be able to sustain a full lactation in subsequent lactations.

Plan for Kid Deliveries

Gestation is 150 days, +/- 5 days. Hand breeding, rather than field breeding, makes for less stress for the goat keeper. It provides a narrow field of when to expect kids, so that you can decide how many goats you wish to have kidding in any given time frame. If there is a meat market in your area for excess buck kids, you can plan kiddings so that the buck kids are of the desired size at the time when prices are highest. Winter kids grow better because the parasite burden is lowest in the cold months. Also, the cold inspires kids to move around more, creating more muscle, which in turn makes kids larger and healthier. If your facilities aren't adequate to kid in the cold, then you should plan to kid when the weather is warmer. Just remember that the later in the season you kid, the less growthy you can expect your kid crop to be. Hand breeding allows you to kid based on show schedules, work schedules, and family schedules. Kidding season is stressful enough. Plan for kid deliveries during the times which will make kidding season easier on you, as well as easier on the goats.