

She Runs Beef Operation Without Heavy Machinery Or Crops

With the right livestock and a minimum amount of equipment, it's possible to run a profitable, small farming operation, says Christina Traeger. She took over the Avon, Minn., farm as a single woman with three daughters in 2002 and currently has about 250 head (including calves) of British White beef cattle. She owns 75 acres, leases another 300 to 400 acres, and her only piece of equipment is a 1997 skidsteer. She notes that her biggest input cost is to purchase hay for winter feed.

Influenced by her parents' sustainable dairy farm practices, Traeger admits she goes against the grain of most stock breeder practices.

"The cattle are 100 percent grass-fed, which most stock breeders won't do. We don't push them to mature early. We've learned that they can outperform other cattle over a lifetime. Our cattle live 20 years or longer," she explains.

She chose the British White breed after extensive research, mostly because she wanted docile animals for her young daughters' safety. They proved to have other good qualities including tender, fine textured meat with good marbling.

"Raising awareness of the breed is something I take very seriously," Traeger says. There are Viking references to British White cattle (www.britishwhite.org), an

ancient breed, which has a small build similar to the original Angus cattle.

Her cattle help raise awareness through some of the sustainable practices she uses. Traeger feeds her cattle with rotational grazing, moving them about every three days. One of her leases is a contract with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for conservation grazing. The DNR wants to improve the growth of warm season grasses, so Traeger's cattle graze the cool season grasses early in the spring to eliminate competition and help warm season grasses get established.

"It costs me more money because of trucking, but it helps me because I can let my land rest," Traeger explains.

She breeds and raises her cattle similar to how bison live. Heifers are older and more mature when they are bred, and they produce more in the long run. Breeding is also later, so calves are born in mid-May when it isn't too cold or wet. She has also trained her cattle to eat thistles and other undesirable forage by baling them from one of her pastures and making it the herd's only food option. They began eating it regularly when they figured out how to turn the thistle so it doesn't prick their mouths. Calves learn to eat thistle flowers, which keeps the seed from spreading.

With the help of her three daughters (one



Christina Traeger and her daughters raise about 250 head of British White beef cattle without raising any crops. She owns 75 acres and leases another 400 acres of pasture. Her only piece of equipment is a 1997 skid loader.

is still at home) who have ownership in the herd, Traeger direct markets her breeding stock and meat through a website and at a couple of farmers markets. Doing everything on their own is a challenge, she says.

"Sustainable farming is not always less expensive, and it's more labor intensive," she says. "You have to do it for the right reasons."

"The more I get involved with the organization, Women in Agriculture (a Facebook group run by Successful Farming

Magazine), I really am finding a lot of people out there who think like me. It's important for people to come together and share knowledge," she concludes.

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Sharp's Pack Goats Bred To Carry

For several years Dwite Sharp's fast-paced occupation was designing and building NASCAR race cars. He decided to get off the fast track 17 years ago when they moved to the Kansas countryside and began raising pack goats.

"We lived in North Carolina and loved backpacking, but shouldering a 30-lb. pack was more difficult for me as I got older," says Sharp. "I heard about pack goats and decided to raise a few animals to see if they'd do what people said they would. Now it's a full time venture for us."

Sharp says they have more than 100 blood lines in their breeding program, and one goat may have several different blood lines in its pedigree. Their business concentrates on showing, educating, breeding and sales. Of the 14 trained pack animals they have now, 4 of them weigh about 300 lbs. and stand 40 to 42 in. tall at the withers. Sharp says a mature goat can carry about 25 percent of its body weight on average and he's had some carry up to 35 percent. Weight is equally distributed in two panniers tied to each side of the pack saddle.

The Sharps have several breeding does, 4 breeding bucks and also use artificial insemination. Some of their does have up to 8 generations of Sharp breeding in their lineage. The family has worked hard to develop and improve herd genetics over the years, and now they're considered one of if not the best breeding operation in the country. They've sold animals in several states and in 2013 even sold 4 to the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus. Those animals perform various tricks, including jumping onto the back of a horse. In the summer of 2015 they sold and delivered 23 pack goat kids to Yellowstone National Park.

Sharp says training pack goats is an on-going process that starts with bottle feeding kids shortly after they're born. "We



Pack goats follow a lead goat without being tied together and carry cargo in their panniers, which are attached to a pack saddle.

work hard on socializing and training them so they understand that their human pack leader is in charge. They're intelligent though and are always testing us." Kids less than a year old start by carrying a small dog pack without much weight. At 4 years old they're at or near full weight bearing capacity. Sharp says experienced animals that know what's expected of them are efficient, friendly and don't complain about their work. They follow a lead goat and don't require a leash to keep them together. Unlike horses and mules, pack goats can travel to any elevation and don't require special feed on a trip. Sharp says they eat weeds and brush and only require fresh water.

For someone who wants to raise pack goats, there's a lot to consider. Sharp says meat goats can make good pack goats if the correct genetics are used. "Our Sabor Hybrids, which are a cross of Saanen and Boer, weigh more than 300 lbs. and stand more than 40 in. tall at the withers."

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Miniature Cheviots Are Spirited, Hardy

Unlike many animals that have been miniaturized through breeding, miniature Cheviot sheep are the same size as their ancestors that roamed the Cheviot Hills in Scotland. According to popular legend, the sheep swam ashore from shipwrecked vessels of the Spanish Armada.

Over time most Cheviots have been bred to be larger for commercial purposes. But a few sheep producers kept the original size which are now called miniature Cheviots.

"They have a certain look that appeals to me - upright ears, bright eyes and spirit," says Dean Hyden in Chewelah, Wash., who got his first Cheviots 40 years ago as a 4-H'er.

"Only the toughest sheep survived the harsh Scottish climate, and the breed, over time, became very hardy," Hyden says. The flock he and his wife, Kari, raise do best with a diet of pasture grass, legumes and forbs in the summer months and a good quality hay in the winter supplemented with free choice salt/minerals and fresh water. That makes the Cheviot a low-cost and easily kept breed. The Cheviot is a dual-purpose breed used equally for their meat and wool. Producing about 5 to 6 lbs. of a medium grade wool, it's ideal for socks and rugged outdoor garments. A unique aspect of its wool is its ability to maintain elasticity when made into a garment. This is due to the wool fiber feature known as crimp prevalent in Cheviot fleece.

Miniature Cheviot rams have a distinctive and traditional look with a short, stocky frame, thick shoulders, and full chests. Historically, they adorn themselves with a white fleece that comes to a full crest toward the back of their necks. The ewes are good mothers of twins, lamb with ease and can reproduce into their teens.

The miniature Cheviots are 17 to 23 in. tall at the withers. Market lambs weigh 80 to 100 lbs. and ewes are up to 85 lbs. Rams weigh up to 100 lbs. Hyden really appreciates their smaller size now that he is older. The lighter weight makes them easier to handle



Miniature Cheviot sheep are the same size as their ancestors that roamed the Cheviot Hills in Scotland, say Dean and Kari Hyden.

for worming and shearing.

"A majority of my clients are ladies in their 50's who want something to raise on their small farm. They use the wool for spinning, weaving and felting made from their own sheep, and it's a breed they can handle with less maintenance," Hyden says. Though they are a little more spirited than other sheep breeds, Cheviots also work well for show animals for youth as their wool washes up very white and their perky appearance makes them stand out above other sheep in the show ring.

Cheviot sheep are very adaptive to all climates, and Hyden has sold sheep as far south as Texas and north into Canada.

More information and a breeders list can be found at the Miniature Cheviot Sheep Breeders Cooperative website, www.minicheviot.com.

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