

Yaks Paying Off For This Small Farm

When corn prices rose and the cost of raising beef cattle showed more red than black in 2012, Craig Dischinger and his family became yak farmers.

"I read articles about yak, visited with producers, and bought some meat to see how it tasted," says Dischinger. "It was the best red meat I'd ever had, so that pretty much sold me."

After discussing the venture with his family and others, the Dischingers bought 5 Royal Tibetan yak cows and a bull for their breeding stock. Royal yaks look like Holstein cattle. All were registered with the International Yak Association (IYAK).

Dischinger says, "When I unloaded them from the trailer, they walked up to the fence where my beef cows were and stood side-by-side, like they were introducing themselves." The 600 to 900-lb. females and 1,400-lb. bull had made new friends with the beef cattle, even though their appearance and body structure is quite different.

Dischinger says both male and female yaks have horns, with each set different from the other. He can identify his animals by the shape and length of their horns. Their hair coat is extremely long, they have a slight shoulder hump and a short tail with very long hair. Yaks also have a "skirt" of long hair that grows from their belly. Yak cows have a small udder with 4 teats tucked high between their legs. Calves

nurse within an hour of birth and can walk and run a few hours later. Dischinger says they're slowly taming their herd and a few of the juvenile animals are like oversized St. Bernard dogs. "They'll wag their tail when we pet them and scratch them behind their ears."

Dischinger says the best part of raising yaks is that they only eat 1/3 to 1/2 as much as an adult beef cow. They thrive on grass/alfalfa hay and don't require grain. Originally bred and raised in the high mountains of Tibet, a yak's stomach gains ample nutrients from lower quality forage than beef cattle. Dischinger has 11 mature yaks on about 4 acres of pasture and also feeds them a 20 percent protein range cube supplement. He says "the cost of feeding and raising yaks is less than half that of beef cattle, and the income opportunities are growing."

Yak meat was the biggest selling point for Dischinger because of its taste and leanness. It's naturally 94 to 97 percent lean with texture similar to beef, but a sweeter taste. Dischinger sells ground yak for \$10 a lb., yak hamburger patties for \$10.50 a lb., and yak summer sausage for \$16 a lb. Steaks will be harvested from the steers. A 1,000-lb. yak yields about 550 lbs. of meat, which is production similar to that of a beef steer. A yak calf will grow to a full size animal for harvesting in about 3 1/2 years. Females raised for breeding will have their first calf



Craig Dischinger raises Royal yaks, which look somewhat like Holstein cattle with extremely long hair coats. Both males and females have horns.

at about 3 1/2 years.

Another source of income from a yak is its cashmere-like fiber. Dischinger harvests fiber from his animals by combing them with a dog brush 5 to 7 times from April to July. Young animals produce about 1 lb. of fiber and older animals produce less due to their subcutaneous fat layer. Dischinger has the fiber processed into skeins of yarn. White fiber sells for \$8 an ounce and black fiber sells for \$4 an ounce. They plan on producing yak hide rugs and blankets, yak leather chopper mittens with yak fiber liners, hats and scarves. Cleaned skulls and bones can also be sold.

"I've loved every minute of yak farming

and wish I would've discovered them sooner," Dischinger says. "They're very unique animals, easy to raise, aren't affected much by the heat or cold and are very friendly when they've had a lot of human interaction. Another big plus is that when calves are weaned the cows and calves don't make a lot of noise like beef animals. A yak just produces a barely audible grunting sound."

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Miniature zebras weigh between 300 and 600 lbs. and are no more than 42 in. tall. They graze like sheep and browse like goats.



Miniature Zebras Gaining Popularity

Miniature zebras are gaining ground by replacing goats in many situations, according to David Millison, president of American Miniature Zebu Association (AMZA). The pint-sized cattle with big humps are perfect for small farms.

"Zebu meat is lean, and when you process a full-grown steer, you don't end up with a freezer full of meat that will go bad before you can eat it all," says Millison. "The zebu is both a grazer like sheep and a browser like goats. They help keep brush down like goats do. We are seeing a lot of people who have been raising goats transitioning to zebras."

Like goats, zebra milk is okay for those who are lactose intolerant. "Also like goats, miniature zebras are easier to manage than full-size cattle," says Millison. "They require less barn space and are easier to fence for, as well as trailer."

Miniature zebras weigh between 300 and 600 lbs., depending on height. The smaller the female, the slower she is to mature and breed, with most being around 2 years old before breeding. Height should not exceed 42 in. when measured at the hip. While zebras come in all colors, a wash or second color over a base coat often is preferred.

"Heifers start at \$1,500 to \$2,000 and go

up from there," says Millison. "Bulls can be very cheap or very expensive, with some that perhaps shouldn't be in the gene pool selling for as little as \$500. Bulls with good pedigree, color, conformation and characteristics start at \$2,500 and go up from there."

Millison suggests the meat sells at a premium, with ground beef going for \$6 to \$8 per lb. and steak considerably higher. He notes it is especially popular with Hispanic, Asian and Middle Eastern markets.

"The hump is considered a delicacy," he says. "It has muscle, but it is also a storehouse for fat, so it has a lot of marbling."

Zebu cattle are thought to be one of the earliest domesticated cattle breeds, possibly as old as 6,000 years. Commonly found in Africa, Asia and India, they have more heat tolerance and insect resistance than European breeds. However, Millison says the animals do well in northern countries as well.

"There are a number of breeders in Canada and other high snow areas," he says. "They're very slick-haired cattle and do need to be able to get in out of the weather."

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Longtime Peacock Experts Say "Be Careful" When Buying Birds

Dennis Fett is a long-time peacock breeder and promoter. He tells people to be very particular when picking out birds to buy.

"Peacock" actually just refers to the male "peafowl". Males have the eye-catching spread tails with the eye design on every feather. Fett and his wife Debra J. Buck are co-owners and co-founders of the Peacock Information Center. He has written books about their care and handling and appeared on TV shows. He points out the hazards of paying big bucks for pretty birds.

"Some people claim there are as many as 186 color types of peafowl," says Fett. "However, in my first book, the chapter on genetics was written by a leading poultry geneticist, who said there were really only 2 common types, the India Blue and the Green peafowl."

Look at any peafowl website and you quickly find a wide range of novel color types. Fett explains that they're derived from crossing the 2 common types. The problem is that they don't breed true. Other problems can also occur.

The Cameo Silver Dun or chocolate peacocks went through a long breeding process, but they have a lethal gene," says Fett. "Half of the offspring turn white and go blind when reaching sexual maturity. Trying to breed that out produces different colors with some unable to reproduce."

If purchasing a specialty color type with the intention of breeding, he recommends asking for a breeding record and referrals from past buyers. While color types can be stabilized, it takes 10 years or more to establish a line.

Fett suggests people interested in breeding peafowl start with several pair of India Blue.

They are hardy in most climates and less expensive than the fancy colored types.

Regardless of color, he warns that peafowl need to be kept in an enclosure. Natural wanderers, they can be a problem for owners and for neighbors.

"They will roam and eat flowers and cause other problems," says Fett. "Also, predators can take them."

Much of what he and his wife have learned over nearly 30 years of breeding peacocks can be found in his 2 books on the subject and a bimonthly publication. They have also produced a variety of DVDs about peafowl.

Fett notes that prices for peafowl have fallen dramatically. For all of his warnings and critiques, he remains positive.

"If you want to breed peafowl, even fancy stuff, keep it simple and have fun with them," he says. "Sit and watch and enjoy them. If you lose a few birds, get some more eggs and keep on trying. Don't give up."

Fett notes that while peacock prices can vary substantially, he suggests an India Blue with full tail feathers can go from \$85 up to \$200. White peacocks can sell for \$250, and Cameos can sell for \$300. Chicks and eggs are substantially less with Fett pricing his by the number ordered. He takes preorders for a single egg for \$21. A minimum order of 100 eggs is priced at \$9 each. Most breeders also sell feathers. Prices often vary by color and condition.

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