

Breeding Older Does

By Nancy Nickel

Age alone is not the determining factor when considering does for breeding. Difficulties due to metabolic factors in carrying kids to term, delivery complications in kidding, and maintaining condition during lactation are important considerations when determining whether or not to breed any doe, especially one over the age of eight. The chance of kidding and health problems does seem to increase with the onset of advanced age in the average dairy goat.

Maintaining the aged doe in optimum condition stands her in good stead for an uncomplicated pregnancy and delivery. Being too thin, having a lack of reserves for carrying multiple babies, can be dangerous for the matron in addition to preventing the proper development of healthy, quality kids. She might be examined to see if she should be dried off prior to breeding which will lessen the strain of milk production and make it more feasible to properly condition her. All bodily systems must be considered. We like to fecal check this portion of our herd to be sure they are not carrying a worm or coccidian load that would prevent them from being in prime condition on breeding day. These parasites are opportunists and just as they are a prime concern for the younger members of a herd, who are being challenged by body growth, so are they factors in maintaining the older does who might find the stress of lactation to be a larger problem than they did in their prime.

Careful examination of the aged doe's molars for sharp or broken edges can reveal a cause of poor thrift. Older does sometimes suffer from teeth that have come out of alignment, or been damaged through years of use. This will make cudding inefficient or even painful and limit the amount of time cud is chewed. The direct result of this is that hollowed in the loin look that is seen in many of our senior citizens. I was not aware that teeth could be floated in goats until I met Doug Curle. Doug had made it a long time practice of collecting old and retired does and was well versed in their care. He showed me how to feel along the outside of the cheeks and look for signs that this was a tender area. We had an eight-year-old in our show string at that time who was at her last show, due to her aged appearance and condition. After floating her teeth with a pony float, she not only revived her youthful appearance, but went on to go Best Doe in Show at 10 years of age and as a bonus, kid the last time at age 12.

Foot care is also an area that the herd manager can manipulate to maintain the desired body condition in older does. Feet that are allowed to become too long cause more difficulty to older does than to younger herd mates due to the additional possibility of arthritic joints. The older doe that has a tendency to become more sedentary is in risk of not making her way to graze or to fight as hard at the feed bunk. When trimming feet, take time to monitor body condition to be sure that the addition of winter coat is not making her appear in better flesh than in truth she is. Hands-on awareness indicates how she is holding weight or gaining as she makes her way into fall. We like to feel a little bone, but nothing as sharp as one feels when running one hand over the knuckles of the other. Neither too thin nor too heavy is the desired condition of the aged doe. Older does may profit from separation into groups where competition is less vigorous. By the same token, sedentary habits can cause the older gals to lie by the hay bunk and not receive the exercise needed to promote a healthy life style. Does that are bred to begin pregnancy too heavy can experience metabolic problems, such as ketosis, toxemia, or hypocalcemia. Separation from herd mates into age-grouped living may be the answer for these does as well. Their caloric intake can be monitored and the possibilities for exercise increased. Moving the hay away from the lounging area and away from the water are two managemental concepts that will necessitate does spending more time walking to meet their daily needs. We like to be certain that every older doe bred is actually carrying kids. It is wasteful of feed, worry, and manpower to coddle the matron along in hopes of kids and discover on day 162 that she was not pregnant after all, but in reality getting fat from her extra care. The most reliable method of determining pregnancy we have found has been to draw blood, sending it to Bio Tracking in Moscow, Idaho. These fine folk offer a very user-friendly service and are willing to correspond by e-mail as well as by mail.

For the last month of gestation our does are each housed in solitary pens and the feed individually planned and rationed as a supplement to free choice hay. At this time each doe is carefully monitored for lack of mobility, edema, appetite and condition. Older does are walked in the barnyard daily or turned out individually into runs for observed exercise.

For the best results when breeding older does it is very important to be able to focus on her as an individual. This is the portion of the herd where there are most likely to be difficulties in kidding due to metabolic inability to meet the stress of the job at hand. It seems that older does often benefit from additional calcium as they go into labor. If labor is slow or contractions light, giving some extra calcium with a veterinarian's consent can be a needed boost. Just as a complete mineral program is important for the total herd, an aged doe may benefit from additional selenium as well.

Many prior kiddings sometimes leave the older doe with poor uterine tone. These does are often large, deep bodied, does who have a difficult time presenting kids. It has seemed to us here that the possibilities for malpresentations increase with the number of times a doe has kidded. To be aware of her breeding date and expected due date is a must if she needs assistance. Older does also may tire and in addition to slow presentation of kids there is a possibility that she may cease to labor before the last kid is delivered.

It is very helpful to be able to "bump" a doe and determine if the uterus is empty of kids. To do this one stands next to the side of the doe, reaching around and under her the hands are interlocked grasping her right in front of her udder. Sharply lift up and allow the belly of the doe to fall down abruptly into your hands, which are still clasped underneath her. A rock like thud indicates a kid retained. A soft ball of dough-like material signals the placentas that have not passed. If the muscles feel soft and flaccid, and no kids are felt she is most likely finished. If the muscles of the belly are tight and hard, consider that they have not finished with the work they have set out to do. (It is important to note that a helper can hold a doe's belly up, maneuvering it in such a way that kids can be more easily reached if it is necessary to intervene, as in the case of uterine inertia.)

The desired end is a doe who, in spite of her advanced years and numerous kiddings, can deliver kids and also enter the milk string with no difficulty. It must be considered, however, that with each year the risks older does face in carrying out these duties seem to increase. It might be possible to extend the number of kiddings by drying her up after kidding, if kids are the desired commodity. If production is the main goal, it might be a consideration to milk the aged doe through and not breed her annually. For example, we started our dairy experience 25 years ago with a \$25 doe. She was 13 years old and milked a half-gallon a day-every day-for two more years. We fed her rolled oats and the best hay we could find. Looking back, this doe was probably the best return in milk-for- money paid we have ever experienced. Her production was perfect for our homestead needs.

It is up to each herdsman to weigh the balance between the risk to health and life against the contribution made to the herd. This is an individual equation which comes into play for some does at eight years of age and others at maybe 10 or 12. Certainly to enjoy these older individuals is one of the continuing joys of goat keeping.