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Lincoln, NE. July 22-24, 1992. 5:11-13.*

*Sponsored by: United States Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Research Service,
University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE, DowElanco, Nebraska Leafy Spurge Working Task
Force.*

Cashmere – the new American challenge - 1991

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Cashmere, we love to just touch the sensual, ultra soft fabric, even if we can't afford to own it. Sweater prices start at \$200 and up, blazers at \$1,000 and up. As early as the 15th century cashmere was known as the fiber for kings. The demand has always exceeded the supply.

The Himalayan regions China, Outer Mongolia, India, Afghanistan, and Iran have been the traditional sources of cashmere. Since 1985 these countries have been in such political disarray, that the supply of cashmere has been disrupted. To further deplete the supply available to processors, in the 1970's China started to dehair its own fiber and produce garments, mainly sweaters for export. The world processors need an efficient and reliable source of high quality cashmere fiber.

Cashmere is not a breed, but a type of goat. A percentage of all breeds of goats will carry the gene to produce the fine under down called cashmere, these goats through selective breeding can be the basis for a cashmere-producing herd. These goats can be any combination of cross-bred goats, including the dairy breeds, and as long as they produce a marketable cashmere fiber, they are cashmere goats. The only goats that should not be crossed are angoras, they produce cashgora which is not a commercially salable fiber.

Serious western cashmere production began with the identification of cashmere fiber in the 'feral' or wild goats herds of outback Australia. These were offspring of goats brought by the first settlers in the 1780's, many of which had escaped into the wild. In 1978 a serious breeding effort was undertaken and the Australian industry has grown. Both the Australian and the New Zealand cashmere industries have used animal husbandry techniques unknown to the traditional cashmere producing countries, and have made very dramatic progress in improved production and quality.

It is interesting to note that both in Australia and the United States, the cashmere industry has been promoted to a great extent by women. Part of this is due to the size of the animals, but it also seems that women and goats relate well. Two women, Bronwyn Schuetze and Jill Darrah, from Longmont, Colorado imported the first three Australian cashmere goats in late 1987. Judith Richardson of Silver Creek, Washington imported 10

goats in June of 1988. Many more goats were imported from Australia and New Zealand over the next two years to become the nucleus of the American cashmere industry.

There are four major cashmere processors in the world, of these Amicale Industries and Forte' Cashmere Company are American and both strongly support a growing American cashmere industry.

The fleece of the cashmere goat is made up of two very distinct fiber groups, 1) the fine underdown known as cashmere and 2) the coarse outer hair known as guard hair. The cashmere dehairer separates these two fiber groups and offers them for sale. (Forte' Cashmere Company)

The full definition of cashmere accepted by Forte' Cashmere is: Cashmere – the fine down undercoat fibers produced by a cashmere goat. This fiber has a mean diameter of 10.0 microns or less and the co-efficient of variation around the mean shall not exceed 24%. There cannot be more than 3% of fibers (by weight) over 30 microns. The fiber is not medullated.

Goats have special fencing needs, both to keep them in and predators out. The recommended fencing consists of five strands of barbed wire, three hot and two grounded. If woven wire is used, it must either have mesh too small for the goats head or it must be large enough for them to get their heads and horns back out. This larger size will not keep the kids in. Horns caught in a fence or even a crotch of a tree are real problems. They are at risk not only of starvation or predators but other goats are apt to attack and kill them. We have never had a goat that showed any aggression toward us, but they are not kind to their own.

Health problems in goats are similar to those of sheep. They are subject to internal and external parasites and pneumonia. Their hooves may need to be trimmed, depending on the walking conditions, rocky ground pretty much takes care of that problem.

Goats are hardy animals and kidding problems are nothing any experienced livestock person would find unusual. Umbilical cords should be treated with iodine to prevent infection. With proper management it is possible to get three kid crops in two years.

Goats are very useful in all types of brush control. They can be pastured with cattle and sheep as they each have different grazing habits. Goats prefer browse. Goats are very useful in controlling leafy spurge, red cedars, and all sorts of undesirable brush and weeds.

Guard dogs or donkeys can be used to discourage predators.

We, at Airy Knoll Farms, did not know any of the above information when we became involved with goats. We had reached retirement age when we sold the last of our dairy herd in the whole herd buyout program. We knew we had been very hard on our pastures in the last months of the buyout, and we wanted to repair the damage done by too heavy grazing. We also had paved lots, loafing sheds, calf barns, and feeding facilities that had housed 1000 head of cattle. We wanted to use our facilities and improve the pastures. Our first 100 angora goats came the day before the last of the cattle left. Life has never been the same.

We looked at those goats with all their horns and decided we hadn't lived with horns on our dairy cattle and they had to go. That was before we learned that those are the only handles those little animals have. The horns stayed and we use them daily. We didn't know then that if it won't hold diesel fuel it won't goats – a very profound saying.

Next we read about Successful Farming's Adapt 2 and five members of our family attend. We thought maybe mushrooms would be a good idea for our milking barn, or maybe something else would catch our fancy. Retirement is supposed to be fun, so we were just going with the flow. The conference was interesting and we learned a lot, but we didn't settle on anything.

In 1988 we read about a cashmere goat conference to be held at Longmont, Colorado. We had goats and it sounded interesting. We learned a lot, we couldn't cross our angora goats, but we could buy Texas meat goats and get started. We came home with a three month old, \$400 1/2 blood or F1 buck and we were on our way, all we needed were some does. Several weeks before, two family members had delivered mohair to the warehouse in Texas, and attended a sale where they saw thousands of meat goats. At the time they couldn't imagine anyone wanting those goats. Now we had a need for some of those goats, so it was back to Texas.

Many Texas ranchers at that time were not aware of cashmere, in fact they really didn't like goats that showed it. We had contacted a rancher who would let us go through some of his does and select for cashmere. We came home with 54 does and 3 big Spanish bucks that showed down. The does cost \$75 and the bucks \$125. In 1989 we sheared and sold our first 57 fleeces, for an average of \$2.76. We got enough to pay for the shearing and the UPS charges. We were members of CaPRa – Cashmere Producers of America, and we had marketed our first product.

At the conference we had been told it probably would take 10 to 15 years to develop a good herd from native stock, the quicker way was to import genetically superior animals. Since we were 65, we were not too sure that this would still be fun by the time we were 80, so we decided to buy some imported goats. We ordered 10 head, a black blue-eyed buck and 9 does bred to unrelated bucks. We ordered 3 each of white, brown and black does. Our goats cost \$3000 each, (a large part of the cost is for the 90 days quarantine and transportation costs) and we had to pick them up on the west coast. We had been told we wouldn't get rich on these goats and we were out to prove that.

Also in 1989 we returned to Texas to select goats from a black herd. We brought home 43 big meaty goats at a cost of \$50 per head. Shortly after that the rancher changed his ad to read "black Spanish goats with cashmere."

In 1990 we sheared and marketed 197 fleeces, at an average price of \$4.18. Our import head had grown to 39 head. Of the imports we had lost a set of triplets at birth and an older kid from pneumonia.

In 1991 we took goats to the first Cashmere Show and Sale at the Western National Livestock Show at Denver. We showed the Reserve Champion Six-tooth doe, a third place milk-tooth doe and a fourth place milk-tooth buck. In the show for sale we had the Champion Doe, the Champion Buck and the buck made Grand Champion. We also had a Texas meat goat that made it into the sale and brought \$400.

We entered 8 fleeces in the first American Cashmere Marketing Coop Contest and had third place adult male and second place male kid.

We sheared and sold 360 fleeces for an average of \$3.01, many of these fleeces were kid fleeces. Our import herd had grown to 66 head. We were selling a few breeding animals. Our Texas Spanish goat herd had grown to over 500 head, over 400 of which were F1 crosses. We hope to develop a demand for goats for control of leafy spurge, red cedars, and buck brush. Until that time cull goats will be sold for meat, we will sell several hundred this fall. Until we improve our cashmere production, the sale of meat goats will be necessary for a profitable bottom line.

To save stress and anxiety we use baby monitors (people baby monitors) in the buildings. At first we used them only at kidding time but we still leave several out year round now to keep us in touch with what is happening. They only have two channels so in busy times several monitors are reporting in to the same unit, we don't always know just where the problem is but it isn't hard to locate it. This makes for a noisy house but it is something we just ignore when the noises are normal. We have found these little units will carry the distance of a city block. We wouldn't be without them.

Our angora herd numbers about 400 animals now and we have 65 Rambouillet ewes.

Retirement isn't exactly what I expected, but it is never dull. We welcome visitors anytime, we are not far off I-80 in central Nebraska.