

Luxury fibre from friendly goats

The primary reason for farming Angora goats is for the quality, sustainable, natural mohair fibre they produce. Mohair is a luxury fibre that is used to make lightweight yet warm yarn and fabrics. Those who are sensitive to the 'itch' of wool clothing can usually wear mohair comfortably, because, unlike wool, the smooth structure of each fibre of mohair means it is without 'prickle'.

Angora goats are shorn twice a year, usually in February and August and the fleece can be sold through Mohair Australia Ltd, although the fine, lustrous fibre from young kid goats has a ready market with handspinners. As the goat ages, the fibre it grows becomes coarser and is less valuable. The fibre grows in ringlets all over the goat's body, at the rate of about 2cm per month yielding around 2kg of fibre twice a year. The smaller and tighter the ringlets, the better the quality of the fleece and the better the yarn made from it will be. Mohair fibre takes dye well and retains its lustre and durability. It doesn't readily shrink and matt, which sets it apart from wool.

As well as the production of fleece, another plus to keeping angora goats is their ability to digest a variety of weeds and shrubs that sheep or cattle avoid. They are browsers, rather than grazers and enjoy eating woody weeds such as blackberry. They actually need roughage in their diet and if their paddock consists only of lush grass they need to be provided with some dry hard herbage such as straw or hay. Goats enjoy eating thistle flowers. This reduces the amount of seeds being produced and, over time, the numbers of thistle plants will be reduced. Intensive grazing by goats (high numbers of goats within a fenced area) is an acceptable method of dealing with blackberry. Goats find all parts of the blackberry plant palatable and their constant grazing will weaken the plant. After shearing is the best time to use Angoras to eat the blackberry bushes, as goats with long fleece can become entangled in the thorny bushes. Goats can be used in steep or rocky areas where it is difficult to get machinery in to remove weeds.

Like sheep, goats are herd animals, four animals being the smallest number that makes up a herd. Within the herd, goats have an organised social structure. Every herd is headed by a dominant male and female - 'King' and 'Queen'. The dominant female leads the others off to pasture, she gets the best sleeping spot and the best spot at the feeder and her kids are 'royalty' by birth. She retains her status until she dies or until she becomes infirm and is challenged and overcome by another, younger doe.

Similarly, the Head Buck, who is the biggest, strongest and often the oldest male in the herd, retains his leadership until he dies or is challenged. Usually the Queen outlasts several Kings.

Another characteristic of goats is that they intensely dislike being cold and wet, and at the first drop of rain they will race to their shed to shelter from wind and stay dry. They will leap over streams and puddles rather than step in them and they dislike mud. They also dislike eating soil – whereas sheep will eat grasses right down to root level, goats tend not to.

September/October is kidding season and twins and triplets are common. Kidding mostly happens during daylight hours and usually without assistance. Newborn kids are small and lack the energy reserves that newborn lambs have. They are susceptible to cold and wet weather and attack by foxes. Often breeders put does and kids in a shed overnight for the first few nights. Goat breeders have had success with using alpaca wethers or Maremma dogs as guardians. These guardians are particularly useful in looking out for predators in the paddocks because the doe has the habit of 'planting' the baby, (well hidden in her opinion, and asleep) and then going off to graze. With sheep, the lambs follow the mother closely, but goat babies are 'hidden', possibly in longer pasture or near a fence, by their mothers. Thus, a sleeping baby goat on its own is susceptible to attack by predators such as foxes, eagles or wild dogs. A good alpaca or Maremma guardian will see the danger and protect the kid by chasing the predator away.

Angora goats are fibre producers, lawnmowers and weed eaters, but anyone who has spent time with them cannot fail to be charmed by their friendly, inquisitive nature, and delighted by the playful antics of the young kids. 'Toys' for the kids are anything they can climb on – logs or mounds of earth - and play "King of the Castle". After being around goats for a while, breeders attest to their intelligence and curiosity. They are said to be one of the most intelligent livestock. They have excellent long-term memories and enjoy human company. 🐔

For more information on goat keeping:

chat to Reg and Gill Scott (of Winder Angoras and Alpacas) and Steve Smith (of Mundroola Angoras) who will be on hand with their angora goats and young kids in the livestock marquee at the Berry Small Farms Field Days.