

Multi-acre Property Usage

You're about to buy a house in the country with a few acres and are looking forward to starting a small hobby farm. You've never raised livestock, but it's been your American Dream to enjoy the lifestyle. How do you get started?

It's important to accept the fact that almost every farm undergoes an eternal evolution. It is extremely rare for a new owner to be perfectly content with their new farm and never change a thing. That is, you will never run out of ideas for improving what you have. You may decide to switch from sheep to goats, wood fence to T-posts with hot wire, or multi-purpose barn to multiple outbuildings for different purposes. This process is one of the benefits of the rural lifestyle.

For most folks, economics and knowledge are the limiting factors. A good place to learn about both is your local feed and farm supply store. Often, they're the first to hear about the tribulations your neighbors experienced, making their wisdom a valuable commodity.

Speaking of neighbors; meet them. In rural areas, neighbors are not just the friendliest folks you'll ever meet, but they can be your greatest ally. Rural neighbors are quick to help each other out and are an excellent source of information for what does and does not work.

Your initial concern is to provide food, water, and shelter for the animals. Although the first two items can be imported, the land supports the shelter, provides grass for grazing, a foundation for the animals' sure footing, and anchors your fence posts.

The first step is to make an assessment of the land and existing outbuildings. What's suitable for poultry may be inappropriate for horses.

If you are going to start off with grazing animals (e.g., horses, cattle, and sheep) you will need a perimeter fence. You don't want your livestock wandering into the next county and your neighbor doesn't want your goats eating their garden. While a barbed wire fence may be appropriate for cattle, it would be extremely dangerous for horses. Likewise, what may be respected by a horse could be demolished by a steer.

Another consideration about land is soil quality, texture, and contour. Invite an expert to review your property and ask them:

- ✓ What effect will livestock have on soil compaction and erosion?
- ✓ To conduct a soil test.
- ✓ To conduct a forage test of the pasture.
- ✓ To assess a stocking rate (the number of animals and species the pasture can nutritionally support).
- ✓ For assistance in developing a pasture management plan.

Shelter is imperative for all livestock. Although most of the larger species don't require insulated, heated facilities during the winter, adequate protection from the elements can be provided with run-in shelters which have three sides and a roof. However, in the event of health and reproductive issues, improved

facilities could become essential. Many ranchers have brought a newborn calf into their home for bottle feeding by the fireplace.

Ideally, you would prefer a farm with a pond or creek which will remain viable throughout the year. If not, and the land does not have the potential for constructing a pond, then stock tanks become the preferred solution. When the water temperature consistently drops below 40° F, a stock tank heater is necessary, especially in freezing environments.

Keep in mind that a band of horses can easily consume 100 gallons of water per day during the summer. Add household usage to that amount, the potential for a prolonged power outage or well failure, and you may find yourself hauling hundreds of gallons water each day. Always be prepared for emergencies for not just your family, but for your charges as well.

The primary diet of grazing animals is forage. Ideally, pasture would satisfy the majority of their nutritional requirements, but, often that may be impractical and require purchasing hay. If you presume that your livestock will consume 2% of their body weight in feed each day, and adjust for losses, just three horses will require one ton of hay each month.

If suitable storage facilities are not immediately available, pallets and secured tarps may adequately protect hay bales. Another option is to provide round bales if you have the means to load them into a round bale feeder.

Eventually, a tractor with implements will be added to your wish list. A new tractor with a few implements can easily exceed \$50,000. Since requirements, individual preferences, and usage varies from farm to farm, consider buying used equipment until you have a firm grasp of what you will require.

Maintaining the health of your livestock is a high priority. Once you've selected a veterinarian, established rapport, and provided directions to your farm, ask the doctor for a list of what first aid supplies you should have on hand. Most of the items are available at your farm supply store.

Other items you should consider are:

- ✓ Emergency equipment, such as calf buckets with nipples, if you intend to breed your animals.
- ✓ Tack and handling equipment, especially halters and lead ropes, which are necessary to properly and safely maintain control of your livestock.
- ✓ Grooming supplies.
- ✓ Trailers; general purpose stock or specialized (e.g., horse and flatbed) trailers.
- ✓ Routine health care items such as anthelmintics (dewormers), insecticides, and hoof care equipment.

Lastly, a dependable pickup truck is inescapable. Whether it's for hauling hay and feed, carrying supplies to mend fences, or rescuing a calf, the truck is the primary work horse.

Starting a hobby farm may seem daunting, but the challenges are very enjoyable for the entire family and will provide lasting memories, if you take it one step at a time. Plan your farm for at least five years

out, but don't etch it in stone. Slow down and enjoy each step of the way. A good rule of thumb for a novice is to never add more than one species of livestock per year.