

# Just Pets?

## *By Maggie Leman*

“My goats are just pets....” I hear this a lot from people asking my advice. But what does that really mean? Are they less valuable? Are these goats somehow not as “good”? Are they less worthy of the best care? I DON'T THINK SO!!

What does the pet owner really expect from their goats? Pet owners expect a long, happy, active life and easy care. Pet goat breeders want all of that AND lots of cute babies. Show goat breeders want this too! That is why breeding for characteristics and using good husbandry practices that speak to these goals are important for ALL breeders. I think ALL breeders should be working toward the qualities that make Pygmy Goats exceptional pets.

So, you are not really interested in breeding for the show ring, that's fine! You can forgive a goat that has too much white in all the wrong places, or whose ears may be set a bit low, or has a Plain Jane face on a neck that is a bit long. But all breeders should be working toward the general improvement of the breed, never lose sight of that. You need to start with good stock with traits that will help them lead a trouble free and active life. Look for good structure FIRST, sound legs and feet for all the miles they will walk in a long lifetime of foraging and following their owners, a strong level topline with ample length and depth of body to carry many pregnancies and be able to run and jump and play with the herd, a strong jaw and normal bite, not over or undershot, so they can chew their food well into old age. Pygmies are supposed to be small, but don't try to breed for “Mini Pygmies”. They need to all be of adequate size to be able to reproduce safely and to lead a happy life living outdoors. Let's not go the way of some of the teeny tiny teacup dog breeds. Be “color blind”; do not forgive poor structure just because the goat is your favorite color.

You should choose a buck of EXCELLENT structural quality, do NOT skimp here! For the best results your buck should be your very best animal. Don't ignore his “feminine side”, his dam and his sire's dam should have good udders and his mammary system, such that it is, should be normal; his pelvic structure should be exactly like good brood doe. Remember he will be passing these traits to his doe kids. His job is to help improve the traits of the does in your herd, making the kids better not the same or worse. Very often you can find a buck of high quality but with a cosmetic fault that will keep him out of the big ribbons. This could be the perfect buck for you!

Your does should have ample pelvic capacity to carry and pass kids easily, strong legs and back for supporting the added weight of their pregnancies, a sound bite for when they are eating for two or more, and a good udder for feeding lots of kids through many years of production. Goats with poor legs and feet go permanently lame much too early in life; goats with crooked teeth may starve in the face of plenty unable to adequately chew enough to digest properly. Does with poor pelvic structure die kidding or run up huge vet bills. A doe with a sagging udder has trouble feeding her kids, is prone to mastitis. Goats with unsound structure pass these traits and it becomes worse with each generation. Unsound goats tend to lead shorter more troubled lives. This is definitely NOT the direction a breeder of nice PET GOATS wishes to go!

Because your goats are “just pets” doesn't mean you can ignore sound husbandry practices or cut corners. Keeping healthy productive pet goats is nearly the same as raising good show stock. Sure you don't have to keep them in show condition, but they shouldn't ever look less than well fed, fit, sleek and shiny, the picture of good health. Sure you may never trim Nanny's beard to make her look more feminine for the judge or ever bath Billy. Pet goats deserve ample good quality hay, forage and feed, and proper mineral supplementation to produce kids that are born healthy and vigorous and to raise those kids to weaning, AND be able to do it year after happy year. You need to follow a sound vaccination and parasite control program to produce healthy pets and be able to share that knowledge. You should establish a good working relationship with a competent vet, even if you intend to do “all” of your vet care yourself. You should keep up with breeding dates to know when to expect kids. You should be careful to not breed does too young for safe kidding or too old to carry comfortably or too often that they “wear out”. You should practice good record keeping, tracking kidding dates so as to not sell kids too young or leave bucklings with the doe herd so long you have a bunch of unplanned pregnancies. You should keep up with pedigrees to avoid serious inbreeding. You may never register any of your goats but new pet owners want to know all about their newest family member. Being able to tell them exactly who Mom and Dad are, when Junior was born and how many siblings he has are important! How else will they know when to celebrate a birthday or be able to brag on their pet's “lofty ancestry”? Treat your herd like the fine goats that they are and they will be the beloved companions to their owners and your pride as their breeder for many many years.

So, NEVER say your goats are “just pets”. Being a good pet is the highest goal a Pygmy Goat can achieve.