

## **KISS, SSDD**

**By Maggie Leman**

**Keep It Simple Sweetheart**, okay that's not how most of us know it, but Mom tried to teach me to be nice. This is SOOOO important when you are keeping goats. Most domestic livestock thrives on monotony, or SSDD, **Same Stuff Different Day**, oh, Mom will be so proud of me.... And yours will thrive on it too.

Goats digest in a completely different way from horses, dogs and cats and people. They are ruminants, meaning they have a multi-chambered "stomach", cleverly designed for processing an amazing amount of the coarse leaves, bark and brush into goat. That first very important chamber is quite large and essentially a big fermentation vat populated by a gazillion happy microbes. This explains why goaty kisses and goaty breath smells a bit like a really great mulch pile. Those wonderful little bugs just love to eat cellulose that, to us anyway, is nearly indigestible fibrous plant matter. These microbes are real sticks-in-the-mud; they hate sudden change. Any dietary change should be made slowly over 10 days or so to hide the fact that change is good from those microbes. Believe me, you DO NOT want them all going on strike or suffering from a terrorist attack from the bad microbes that always are lurking, looking for a chance to cause trouble.

Wild goats eat plants, leaves, bark, tender twigs, coarse grass, leafy brush, pretty much anything that grows 8 or more inches above the ground is a potential entrée in a goat's buffet line. They browse, taking a few of these and a bit of that as they slowly pass through an area. If we could offer a wide variety of nutritious plants to our goats to feed on like this it would be ideal. Wild goats (and many wild herbivores) migrate, taking a circuitous annual route covering many hundreds of miles eating and drinking along the way. As they slowly pass through different regions, the plant variety may change. In this way they get the different nutrients they need. By eating from plants growing well off the ground they also avoid parasite eggs, which are found mostly on the first 3 inches of stem. Thus wild goats don't really need a lot of natural parasite resistance, like the herds that come after them that graze close to the ground. But goats will eat what is available if forced to do so. It is in their nature to browse, if they can't browse they will graze. First they eat the tasty stuff, and then they eat the not so tasty stuff. For the most part toxic plants taste really bad, well fed goats won't eat them even if there is an abundance of them. They won't eat just anything either! Goats are picky, a lush green brushy pasture may look like goat heaven to you, but if the plants are toxic, too coarse, or so depleted in nutrition from growing in poor soil goats on pasture browse alone will not do well. Offering a good quality, somewhat coarse but not stemmy hay, is a good way to feed those blessed microbes and keep your goat in healthy condition. I mean GOOD QUALITY hay too, not last year's leftovers, not the stuff that got rained on. Feed the hay the grower brags on, feed the hay that smells so good you are tempted to add a bit of ranch dressing and dive into yourself. In the long run, this is cheaper to feed than a lesser quality hay and grain. It is much better for your goats, it is pretty much as nature intended. Often this is all your goats need in the way of actual food.

You are supposed to feed your goats goatfeed, right? That's how you feed your dog, your cat, your fish and your parakeet, right? It's all they need right? Wrongo! Some goats, certainly not all of them, benefit from a ration of



grain. Feed manufacturers also assume that you will probably choose a mineral and salt supplement to fine-tune the dietary needs of your herd. Grain should also be considered a dietary supplement, not the main course. As I said earlier FORAGE AND HAY is the main course. Now our herd of pygmy goats are production goats, okay we pamper them like pets, but not with food! We ask our girls to have healthy babies at least once a year for most of their lives and raise them themselves, to look great in the show ring, glowing pictures of health, and from some we ask for a share of their milk. Hard working goats like ours and like those having babies, breeding lots of does, growing fast to go to market, and giving an abundance of milk may need a grain ration to meet their needs and stay in healthy productive condition. But lots

of goatkeepers think they will be saving money by feeding the cheapest grain ration out there, often straight corn. Corn is not really high in the nutrition; it is essentially starch (read sugar). It has its place in a grain ration, sure it does. Hard working goats need the energy. Now all goats love corn, but of course they do, its CANDY. Feed

manufactures include it in varying proportion to meet the needs of the goat producer and his goats. Some feeds are for that final fattening before sending the goats off to market; these may have lots of corn. Some feeds are for dairy goats in maximum lactation, these feeds may have a good bit of corn. These stages in a goat's life call for a good bit of energy as well as a high plane of nutrition. One more thing here, a ration labeled for sheep and goats is only really good for sheep. It does not have enough copper added for the good health of most goatherds. Many feed manufacturers and unfortunately many vets and county extension agents haven't yet learned that goats are not sheep; goats need copper. It is up to you to know what your goats need and shop accordingly.

A pet goat whose goal is to be a pasture ornament, doesn't need to be on a body builder's diet. I know, your pet goats LOVE their grain ration, of course they do! Feed manufacturers add stuff to make it taste better, if a client's goats won't eat it the client won't be buying any more, right? Okay, a handful twice a day is not going to hurt, but I mean ONE handful not as much as you can scoop up with both hands. Even our working girls seldom get that much! Over feeding grain can lead to much more than a fat goat. It sets a male goat up for bladder stones, urinary calculi. Many many male goats are castrated each year and sold as pet wethers. These are often a new goat owner's first experience with goats. It is our nature to spoil those wethers rotten. It is so easy to love them to death with food. Look what we Americans are doing to ourselves and even our house pets! We read the RIOT ACT to our potential buyers about overfeeding grain. I am reading it to you NOW, so LISTEN UP! For the sake of that sweet little kid I sold you and the one that you have fallen in love with, please please please do not feed him more than he can clean up in 5 minutes. Any more than that, pick it up. Chances are your wether will thrive to be an old man. He will love you just as much, even more if you will tend to his itchy spots with a good brushing, rather than give an extra ration of grain.

Finally, I'm going to give you my secret weapon, proper mineral supplementation. Unlike pet food manufacturers, livestock feed makers pretty much assume their grain feed product is only a small part of your herd's diet. They also make and sell dozens of different goat mineral blends, sheep and goat mineral blends, livestock minerals, mineral blocks, loose mineral mixes, mineral tubs, powders, pastes and gels, and want you to think that theirs is the be all and end all of mineral supplements. I whole-heartedly agree that nearly all livestock benefit from having a free choice mineral supplement, but it should be one that complements your basic feeding regimen. So you need to know if you live in an area where there is an iodine deficiency, or a selenium deficiency, or copper or zinc or cobalt deficiency. First let's touch on selenium, it is deficient in most of the country. But even with buying the feed and mineral with the highest levels you can find, it may not be enough. About 20 years ago the FDA took it upon themselves to highly regulate the amount of selenium allowed in both livestock feeds and mineral supplements. For those in very deficient areas it left goat keepers with a serious problem. Selenium deficiency can cause a host of problems, from a type of muscular dystrophy called white muscle disease, to fertility problems, to kidding problems. Problem is that many minerals can also be quite toxic, and often the only sign of that is dead livestock. First thing is to look at the selenium levels found in the soils where your goats graze. But you also have to consider where your goat's hay is grown, where the grain in their feed is grown too. Most adult pet goats do fine on the levels found in feeds or mineral mixes, growing goats or production goats may very well need more. It's pretty darn easy to be sure your goats get enough selenium, a once or twice (for some areas up to 4 times) a year injection of Bo-Se (a selenium and vitamin E supplement, they work together) is easy to provide. But here's the hitch and here's the Fed's again, this is only available by prescription. Selenium is pretty easy to check with a simple blood screening. Copper is another one of those minerals in which many goats in the US are so deficient. For years we were told goats are very susceptible to copper toxicity, just like sheep. Feed manufacturers saw an easy way out and labeled their feeds and minerals for sheep AND goats... Come to find out goats tolerate pretty high levels of copper and actually need an amount that would kill the average sheep. Copper is essential for healthy skin and a glossy coat, it is necessary for the production of red blood cells, it helps promote a strong immune system especially for parasite resistance. The heavier boned and darker skinned goats may need even more than some lighter boned or pink skinned goats. Deficient does may not go into labor properly, the cervix may not open. So what is a goat keeper to do? Goats actually seem to need levels very similar to beef cattle. So a beef cattle mineral may be a good substitute for your herd. And slowly feed manufacturers are hearing the demands of goat keepers and producing correctly formulated mineral mixes for our goats.



Of course we need to use them the right way! We need to understand what makes a goat want to eat this stuff. It is the same thing that keeps us eating handfuls of French fries, potato chips and mixed nuts, its SALT. These mineral mixes all contain salt; that is what attracts the goats to eat them and it is also what makes them stop. So you want for your mineral mix to have about 10 to 20 percent salt, not much more, not much less. If you read the instructions (another of my BIGGEST pet peeves) it will nearly always say, DO NOT OFFER ANY OTHER SOURCE OF SALT. So here I go back to the wild goats. Most wild herbivores crave and need salt, so they visit natural salt licks. These are places where the dirt is high in sodium but it will also be higher in other trace minerals too. So when the wild herd goes for a salty treat they get a dose of trace minerals along with it. Isn't nature grand how she takes care of her creatures? So once again you need to think like Mother Nature and work with the way goats would like to naturally live. Can you feel the harmony yet? I recommend using a loose mineral, once again it is more like what nature provides naturally. It looks like coarse sand. Sure, a block is so much easier but here's the rub, blocks are designed for big animals with big tongues that are often very rough. If a cow ever licks you, you will get exactly what I am saying. For those of you who never intend to get that close to Bessie or Bully let me try to explain. Imagine a cat's tongue only 300+ times bigger and backed up with 1000 pounds of "I want to lick you". You can see how we have come to call an unruly lock of hair a cowlick. With a bit of spit that cow can make anyone's or anything's hair or fur take on a completely new direction of growth. Goats are blessed with rather small tongues that are velvety smooth, not much good for licking a brick.

With the Internet and livestock supply companies bombarding us with ads and admonitions that we just simply MUST give their products to our goats or suffer "dire consequences" it is easy to find yourself over supplementing, over feeding and adding stuff to your goat's diet that they simply do not need. Your feeding regimen can become very complicated very quickly if you give in to the ads. But KISS your goats and they will KISS you back.