Preparing for the breeding season in meat goats and hair sheep

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Are they getting proper nutrition?

Prior to breeding/mating, additional feed should be provided with increased energy content if needed. Breeding does and ewes should have a body condition score (BCS) of 2 ½ to 3 ½ at the beginning of mating (http://www2.luresext.edu/goats/research../bcshowto.html). If not, then they need to be placed on lush pastures and/or by supplementing with grain (usually 0.5 – 1 lbs. of a 10 – 12% CP grain/head/day) for at least 2 – 4 weeks prior to the start of the breeding season. This practice can increase the lambing/kidding percentage by increasing the number of eggs ovulated (‘flushing’). This also increases the number of females cycling earlier in the breeding season.

Barbados Blackbelly ewe with lambs

How young can I breed?

This is a question that is consistently asked. The age of puberty (sexual maturity) in sheep and goats is around 6 – 8 months. However, it is recommended that your ewe lambs or doe kids not be bred until they have reached approximately 60 – 70% of their estimated mature body weight, and are exposed during the middle of seasonal breeding. You want to ensure that the female can successfully carry a pregnancy without any adverse effects on her or the developing offspring (s). First pregnancies usually result in single births. You should also keep in mind that these females are subordinate to their older counterparts and separation for feeding should be considered even during breeding.
Any problems walking?

Presence of any foot/hoof problems can potentially hinder breeding. Before the breeding season, animals should be examined closely for the presence of any sores, overgrown hooves, hoof rot, and lameness. Breeding requires that the female be able to stand for multiple matings, while males are required to frequently mount females in heat, so the presence of any leg or hoof problems should be checked and treated weeks before breeding starts. For more information on proper hoof care visit: http://www.sheep101.info/201/hoofcare.html.

What about worms?

It is also recommended that you check all breeding animals to determine the need for deworming prior to the breeding season. Wormy animals will not increase their BCS during flushing, and if bred might abort or not breed at all. Use FAMACHA© (anemia) eye scores (http://web.uri.edu/sheepgoat/files/FAMACHA-Scoring_Final2.pdf) and the Five Point Check© (https://www.slideshare.net/schoenian/the-five-point-check) to determine an individual animal’s need in a targeted selective treatment approach. Remember, farms in the Eastern U.S. have resistance to many of the available dewormers, so only deworm those animals that need to be dewormed and be sure you’re using an effective drug.

Do they need to be vaccinated?

A recommended vaccine for sheep and goats is CDT. This vaccine provides protection from enterotoxemia/overeating disease (Clostridium type C & D), bloody scours (Clostridium type C) and tetanus/lockjaw (Clostridium tetani/T). The first vaccination is typically given to lambs and kids when they are around 6 to 8 weeks old and then followed by a booster 2 to 4 weeks later and an annual booster every year. Instead of giving the annual booster before breeding, females should be vaccinated 4 to 6 weeks before giving birth. This will allow the dams to confer passive immunity to lambs and kids through their colostrum.

What about my buck/ram?

It can be easy to overlook the male and assume that he can get the job done. However, breeding males should also be checked for all the points discussed above. Bucks/rams can be given their annual CDT booster vaccine before/at breeding since this is usually the time that they are handled the most. Possible disease to check for include pizzle rot, contagious ecthyma (sore mouth) of the penis or prepuce, or lameness making it difficult to mount comfortably. Experience of the male should also be considered. An inexperienced male could be dominated by bigger/older females or males in the breeding group and be reluctant to breed. To help diagnose possible issues of infertility before breeding, all rams and bucks should be evaluated by a veterinarian for breeding soundness at least 1 month
prior to the start of the mating season. A breeding soundness evaluation usually includes a physical examination, scrotal circumference measurement, and semen evaluation. To correctly evaluate if a male is successfully breeding, a marking harness or raddle powder is recommended.

**How many females can my buck/ram handle?**

The typical ratio recommended during a normal breeding season is 1 male: 30/50 females while in a synchronized mating the ratio should be 1 male to every 15/20 females. If you plan to sort into breeding groups, please consider that time might be needed to establish a new pecking order in each group. Additional stress from this could impact reproduction if done at breeding.

**How long should I leave him in?**

During the breeding season, males and females should be together for 40 to 50 days. This ensures that the male has two estrus cycles to cover for each female.

**Summary**

Around 2-4 weeks before the breeding season starts, check all breeding animals to ensure that: (a) they have a minimal BCS of 2 ½; (b) their legs and feet are in good condition; (c) their worm loads are low; and if they need to be vaccinated (males usually). If possible, you also want to have your males evaluated by a veterinarian for breeding soundness at this time to diagnose possible issues before breeding. To flush females, provide additional feed in the form of lush pastures or by supplementation with grain. This works best for thin and older females. *Good luck with breeding!!!!*

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