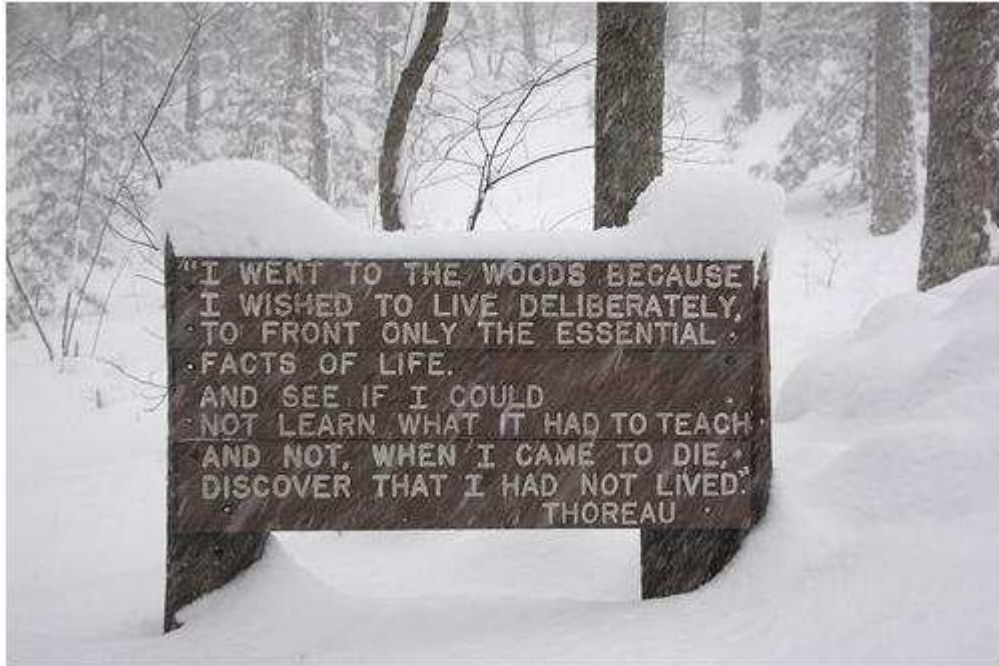


What Are The Best Livestock to Start a Homestead With?



If you are just starting out with the self-reliant life; what are the best animals to start with? That is a tough question as each of us are so very different and where we actually start our self-reliant lifestyle will play a big role in what animals we choose.

Are you urban, suburban or rural? How big is your property? What is the weather? What predators are in the area? What rules, regulations and laws apply? What skills and knowledge do you possess? What are you willing to do to care for the livestock? What are your finances? The list of variables goes on and on.

For instance I have lived on a farm and know how to milk cows and goats, raise and slaughter chickens and I've hunted and dressed the kill. Yet I have no desire to do this on a day to day basis. This doesn't mean I won't have livestock, it just means I will attempt to barter and trade for products or services that I just don't want to have to do if I don't have to. If and when the time ever comes that I have to do these things myself, I know I can do them.

*"The farmer works the soil, The agriculturist works the farmer."
Eugene F. Ware*

There is a ton of stuff out there on small scale livestock and over the years I have found much of this to be rather overwhelming, so I will attempt to list animals that I think would work in as many environments and skill sets as possible. You can take it from there and determine which will work best for you in your situation.

A Few General Rules to Consider Before You Start

- What do you know how to do and or are willing to do on a daily basis to raise and care for your livestock 365 days a year? Just like the family pet, these animals require daily work to keep them healthy and provide you with what you need. Current FDA, USDA, etc regulations will minimally require some kind of inoculation

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regiment. Like all animals, livestock will also need veterinarian care from time to time and routine; daily, seasonal and annual “maintenance”. Look at livestock chores from cradle to grave, as they will change over the age of the animal.

- Location and finances will also limit the choices of what livestock and how much you can raise. Some animals do better in hot areas, other cold; some forage well, others do not; some can be raised urban or rural and some cannot. Some livestock require more space than others. Monies will limit the choice of breed and animal family.
- Stick to heritage breeds that are best suited to the climate you will have them in. Heritage breeds tend to have a “history” of survival of the fittest and will generally require less “maintenance”.
- Think multi-functional with any livestock you decide to raise. Being a small scale homesteader if a breed or family of livestock, give you two or more of your needs, then that is what you should select. Keep in mind the animal may not be the best of the best at each of the items it provides you, but it won't be the worst of the worst either. For example: Chickens can be egg layers or for meat or both. Sheep and goats can provide meat as well as wool and milk. Cattle and cows can provide meat, milk and leather. Dairy cattle are not the best meat sources, but they are not worst either. Just about any animal provides some kind of “gardening” help, either by eating bugs and or generating manure for fertilizing the soil.
- Any livestock that provides you with a product reliant on reproduction will also require you to have both sexes in your “herd”, “clutch”, pasture or barn; or at the least have the services of the opposite sex readily available.
- Think about the feed required for the animal of choice. Can you provide or grow enough on your homestead so you don't have to purchase much if any of the feed? How many animals will your land support? Many newbies forget these important aspects. The more feed you have to purchase, the less monies you have for other self-reliance aspects and the more expensive the animal becomes. The more animals you have on the land, the better you need to rotate and rest the land to preserve it.
- Never underestimate the “Gag Factor”. All animals produce poo and poop sticks. Even small pets like hamsters produce smelly poop. So before you decide on an animal go visit someone who is raising the critter for food and not a pet and determine if the “gag factor” is within your and your neighbor's tolerance range. Let's face it, if you are going to gag every time you go to take care of the animal, then it isn't for you.
- Always check for your area's regulations on livestock. Even if you are rural, some animals and or breeds may be prohibited.

“Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you're a thousand miles from the corn field.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower

How much an animal weighs directly relates to the amount of feed it requires and the amount of manure it generates. It is the basis for determining the amount of land that can support a certain number of animals. This is often referred to as a stocking rate.

Livestock weight varies depending on the type, breed, gender, age, and what you are raising them for such as: food, fiber, working, breeding, pleasure, etc.

For instance one average 1,000 pound horse generates 8-10 tons of manure each year. This contains the same amount of nutrients generated by 13 people or four households, annually.

It takes *one to two acres* of land to support:

- One 1,000 pound horse or cow
- Or 5 to 10 sheep or goats
- Or 2 to 5 pigs
- Or ¼ acre for 6 laying hens

Some Average Livestock Weights

Horse, 1,000 to 1,250 lbs.

Pony 500 to 650 lbs.

Dairy Cow, Holstein – 1,400 lbs.

Dairy Cow, Jersey – 1,000 lbs.

Breeding age dairy heifer (15 months) – 750 lbs.

Dairy young stock 150 to 500 lbs.

Beef cow – 1,000 lbs.

Beef steer finished – 1,250 lbs.

Beef young stock – 450 to 750 lbs.

Sheep or goats 100 to 125 lbs.

Ewe with lamb – 200 lbs.

Growing pig – 65 lbs.

Finishing pig – 150 to 275 lbs.

Sow – 275 to 500 lbs.

Sow with litter – 375 to 600 lbs.

Boar – 350 to 800 lbs

General Livestock VS Land Rules of Thumb

- One animal unit = 1,000 pounds of live animal weight.
- One to two acres of land is needed to support one animal unit.
- Even if land is ample, improperly managed manure storage areas, livestock yards, pastures and direct animal access to water resources can result in pollution and health risks.
- One average horse usually weighs about 1,000 pounds and equals one animal unit. This horse will generate 45 to 50 pounds of manure (0.75 to 0.8 cubic feet) per day, not including bedding or feed waste.
- Properly managed manure storage areas, livestock yards, pastures and eliminating direct animal access to surface waters protects nearby water resources, including your own drinking water well. It also protects the health of your family and animals. Proper management is the key to minimizing risks and adverse impacts.

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- A properly managed pasture provides feed through the months of April to October. It needs to have rest periods during that time to allow for vegetative re-growth.

Regulations

Last but not least, be sure to check local restrictions and laws regarding the types and number of animals that may be kept before you build any pens, butches, coops, or sties. In many well-populated areas such regulations are very specific, limiting the number of animals per household and requiring that shelters be placed a specified distance from adjacent property lines. So save yourself annoyance and extra work by checking the rules before you build or buy.

Of course, even if there are no detailed livestock laws where you live, you should strive to keep noise, odors, and flies from becoming nuisances to your neighbors. Indeed, if you live in an area where back yards tend to be small, you'll pretty much have to make your prospective project's effects on others a prime consideration when choosing your homestead critters.

Best Livestock Options

Animals that need very little space are goats, pigs, sheep, chickens, ducks, turkeys and rabbits. All of these can be kept in an enclosure with some type of housing that keeps them dry during the rains and out of the wind during the colder months.

Many people in the colder regions buy chicks and baby animals in the spring and sell or butcher them in the fall.

The livestock listed below are in no particular order other than chickens. *Chickens were rated the #1 animal to start with by every source I contacted and read.*



*“An overcrowded chicken farm produce fewer eggs.”
Chinese Proverb*

Chickens: These have to be at the top of the list as they really do require very little space and can “feed” off the bugs, eat stray seeds in your lawn or garden area and their “manure” is good fertilizer too. Just don’t let them have direct veggie garden access as they will poke holes in tomatoes and love spinach. They also provided two types of food: eggs and meat. Be sure to select an all purpose breed and preferably one that is heritage or heirloom as these still retain all of their natural instincts and require less human intervention to care for them.

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On average a broiler, for instance, proves its weight-gaining efficiency by yielding nearly a pound of meat for every two pounds of feed. Moreover, a good egg-laying hen will supply about a dozen eggs for every five pounds of feed. Again, certain dual-purpose breeds will actually give a fair supply of both products and when space and or money is limited select a dual breed.

A disadvantage is that the birds will learn to fly over five- or six-foot barriers. So you need to either enclose the top of their pen, or clip their wings to keep them earthbound. In addition, predators may well try to raid your flock, so be sure your coop's fencing and flooring are at least strong enough to deter rats, owls, coons, opossums, and canine prowlers.

I have heard from urban friends that chicken coops in a "citized" neighborhood tend to cause more human commotion than does the appearance of a few rabbit butches and that some urban cities have laws restricting roosters, which means these people need to make breeding arrangements to keep the hens laying eggs.

For a great list of **Multi-Purpose Chicken Breeds** see: "Choosing a Heritage Breed Chicken" <http://planetgreen.discovery.com/home-garden/heritage-breed-chicken.html> on the Wyandotte, The Plymouth Rock, Sussex, and Rhode Island Red varieties .



Rabbits: I know several people that raise rabbits for food and fur. I personally have a hard time thinking of this animal as livestock and food, but you may not. I have eaten rabbit and it is very good and can take on just about any flavor you desire depending on how you cook it. The big plus here is that very little space is needed. They can eat your plant scrapes and not so good vegetables so purchasing pre-made feed is not necessary. They are also quiet, clean, and prolific. Their only real disadvantage is that they are quite predator-prone, so unless you build your butches or fences strong enough to keep prowlers out (or enclose your rabbits in a shed or garage), your stock will be easy prey.



Goats: They also require very little space and help to keep weeds, grasses and the like at a minimum while providing milk and meat. The milk will let make cheeses and other dairy products. They require basic animal care to boot. I only know of a few goat recipes that I like but I do love to make the dairy products out of goat milk. If you drink goat milk it

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will take a little bit of getting used to if you have had nothing but store bought cow milk all your life, but then farm cow milk will require a little getting used to too.

A good doe will yield a gallon of milk each day from a feeding of three to four pounds of grain and a few pounds of hay (the latter helps keep her rumen—part of the animal's digestive system—healthy). Goat's milk tastes similar to cow's milk, yet many folks who can't drink bovine milk can often tolerate the goat milk. Then, too, although the popular breeds in this country are not usually raised for meat production, caprine meat (called chevon) is delicious and tanned hides from the animals can be used for rugs, vests, jackets, and other garments.

For a great list of **Multi-Purpose Goat Breeds** see: "7 Top Heritage Breed Goats for Homestead Success"
<http://planetgreen.discovery.com/home-garden/heritage-breed-goats-success.html>



Pig, Hog, Swine: No matter what you call them, they are amazing animals. Pigs are what I call "rooters" they will sniff and dig around to eat just about anything from grain, kitchen scraps, garden greens, roots, surplus eggs, or offal from other butchered livestock and milk. They are also the best waste-to-meat converters. They don't need much room, you can raise one or two from weanling to market weight in a pen of 16 feet square. All you'll have to do until butchering time is feed and water your stock twice a day and clean out the manure as often as your compost pile needs it or your nose tells you to.

Most pigs are not jumpers, but they will try the best of fences at ground level, so your enclosures must be absolutely "swine tight" at the bottom as they will try to eat or dig their way out. Pigs respond well to electric fences. For young pigs, a wire at 6 inches, and for larger animals, a wire at 12 inches is adequate. Pigs tend to chew through or dig under other fence types.

If you are going to "pasture" feed your pigs be sure to rotate the pastures to keep damage and disease to a minimum. Also, in summer, pigs need a mud hole or sprinkler to keep cool.

The few drawbacks are the effort it takes to butcher and store a 200-pound hog and the smell of well, hog, so you absolutely must consider your neighbors' olfactory tolerances.

Pigs can be used for meat, lard and wax making.

See ALBC for information on these Heritage Swine: Duroc, Hampshire, Yorkshire, Berkshire and Poland China

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Sheep: Sheep are another animal that does not need very much space. They are calm, quiet, almost odor-free, and easy to keep penned. Sheep also need to be fenced in for their protection. Wolves, wild dogs, and coyotes all love to eat sheep. Homesteaders raise sheep primarily for their meat as the wool doesn't often fetch good prices on a small scale.

They can be raised entirely on good grassland (in season) without supplemental grain. When pastured exclusively, they're probably the most economical critter to raise in your backyard farm. You can harvest about 100 pounds of meat and 8 pounds of wool from each adult ewe and an acre of lush pasture will support four or five of the animals and their lambs.

Sheep *do need to be shorn every year* and this can be a problem for the backyard homesteader. Shearing must be done correctly if it's to produce a quality fleece for spinning, and few small flock owners have the time to learn the skill or the money to buy the expensive equipment. Since it may be difficult to find a professional shearer who's willing to work on just a few animals, in the winter (well before the shearing season begins) you should contact someone who shears larger flocks in your area and arrange to have your sheep included in that person's rounds.

Lambing time can be an issue. Ewes will need to be watched (and assisted, if necessary) to be certain they care for their lambs properly, and you'll have to guard the timid creatures constantly against predators. Sometimes the mother rejects the lamb and it is necessary to bottle feed it, which will be an additional chore.

For a great list of **Multi-Purpose Sheep Breeds** see: "7 Endangered Heritage Breeds for Homesteading"
<http://planetgreen.discovery.com/home-garden/sheep-endangered-heritage-breeds.html>



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Cattle (Bovine): If you have the space to graze cattle or milk cows for meat and milk, then go for it. The heritage breeds will require less care and guarding than the more common corporate farm breeds. You will get not only their milk or meat but their hides for tanning as well.

Cows and cattle need considerable grazing room—at the least, an acre of lush pasture. Considering this I and all of my homesteading friends strongly recommend multipurpose heritage breeds good for both milk and meat. Did you know cows have been so hybridized that they are just milk machines. You don't find a large variety of cows, either. The heritage breed cow, on the other hand, retains all of the characteristics of its breed. Some are best for farmers that want to try their hand at cheesemaking while others are better for producing a larger quantity of milk. Some breeds do especially well in areas of the country where the weather is often well below freezing and others thrive on the sparse grazing of the dry southwest.

Bovine animals also require quite sturdy fencing, and butchering one of the critters demands a great deal of help and effort (while the 500 to 600 pounds of beef thus harvested will stuff a freezer so full that you'll have no room left for other foods). Last but not least, cows need considerable grazing room—at the least, an acre of lush pasture—which is more land than many homesteaders can spare.

If you can keep the animals very close to your homestead for easy “guarding” then try one of the newer miniature breeds for either meat or milk. I don't know much about these breeds except for a few articles here and there. These are not heirloom breeds but I know of one person who had very limited acreage and these are perfect for their small homestead.

For a great list of **Multi-Purpose Cattle Breeds** see: “7 heritage cows to meet your homesteading needs”
<http://planetgreen.discovery.com/home-garden/heritage-breed-cows-homestead.html>



Horse: I am including these animals, particularly if you pick an all-purpose breed like the Morgan, Mustang or Spanish Barb. Morgan's are light draft horses and train well for carriage and saddle as well as general farm work like pulling a plow or pulling stumps. Mustangs are the feral cousins of the Spanish Barb brought over by the Conquistadors. In many cases you can adopt a mustang for very low costs or even free.



Turkeys: Now here this must be a heritage breed if you want eggs and meat as well as a bird that requires little human intervention. The typical store bought turkey breed will not do, especially when you consider they are so big breasted that they need to be artificially inseminated and most of them have no idea about how to set their eggs

Best Livestock to Start a Homestead With - Continued

There are several varieties of turkeys that are native to North America. Heritage breed turkeys retain all of the characteristics that made them able to thrive in a variety of different climates and under many different living conditions. In fact, Ben Franklin was so impressed with them that he wanted them to be the national bird!

Overall turkeys behave much like chickens in space requirements and food. If you have a little space of your own, raising heritage breed turkeys is not a difficult matter at all. It can also be quite financially rewarding. They eat insects, larvae, seeds, nuts, pasture and grain. They will need a coop and a fenced outdoor range like chickens. They can be used for meat, feathers and insect control as well as eggs.

For a great list of **Multi-Purpose Turkey Breeds** see: "7 Varieties of Heritage Breed Turkeys"
<http://planetgreen.discovery.com/home-garden/varieties-heritage-breed-turkeys.html>

Other Winged Livestock/Poultry (geese, guinea fowl, ducks, quail, and pheasant): Ducks are a pleasure as they graze around on the grass. A dugout or lagoon is not necessary. As long as they have water to drink they will graze just fine. Geese can be territorial and will charge to defend their clutch.

Bees: Ok this really isn't livestock but it is still a very good choice to consider and you can even have a small hive in the city. You will not only be able to make honey, which is good for all sorts of things and get beeswax which is prized, but the bees will help pollinate your garden and orchard. They also do not require a lot of space and you don't have to worry about feeding them at all.

*"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."
Thomas Edison*

Recap of (heritage) Livestock: Species; Food Eaten; Needs; Products & Uses:

(thanks to ALBC- The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy <http://www.albc-usa.org/>)

Species	Food eaten	Needs	Products/Uses
Cattle	Pasture, hay, grain	Fenced pasture, shade, water	Milk, beef, draft power
Horses	Pasture, hay, grain	Fenced pasture, shelter, water	Riding, driving, draft power
Asses	Pasture, hay, grain	Strong fenced pasture, shelter, water	Riding, draft power, driving, guard animal
Sheep	Pasture, hay, grain	Fenced pasture, shelter, water, predator protection	Wool, meat, milk
Goats	Pasture, hay, grain, browse	Fenced pasture, shelter, water, predator protection	Meat and milk, land clearing
Pigs	Pasture, grain, forage, garden waste	Strong fenced pasture, shade, water, shelter	Meat, land cultivation, food recycling
Chickens	Insects, plants, grain, kitchen scraps	Coop, fenced outdoor range	Eggs, meat, insect control
Ducks	Insects, water plants, kitchen scraps, grain	Outdoor range, pond is optional but recommended	Eggs, meat, insect control
Geese	Grass, grain	Outdoor range, pond is optional	Eggs, meat, feathers, down,

Best Livestock to Start a Homestead With - Continued

		but recommended	weed control
Turkeys	Insects, larvae, seeds, nuts, pasture, grain	Coop, fenced outdoor range	Meat, feathers, insect control

The best all around site for looking into any Heritage Animal is: [American Livestock Breeds Conservancy \(ALBC\)](http://www.albc-usa.org/) <http://www.albc-usa.org/>

This site is just chock full of valuable information on getting started with any of these breeds. Including how to grants and assistance if the breed happens to be endangered. In fact all the previous Planet Green article references will lead you back to ALBC!

ALBC Watch List: <http://www.albc-usa.org/cpl/wtchlist.html>

The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy has a wealth of resources available to help you gather information. ALBC has a profile of each breed listed on the Conservation Priority List which includes any breed association or hatchery contacts. Becoming an ALBC member entitles you to receive our Breeder's Directory which lists all members who are currently raising animals, providing another resource for obtaining both information and stock. Hopefully, these resources will help as you assess the appropriateness of introducing different animals onto your farm and into your life.

Contact ALBC: email address is albc@albc-usa.org and phone (919)542-5704.

Other Informational Links:

ALBC Downloadable Resources <http://www.albc-usa.org/EducationalResources/downloads.html>

Beginning Farmers Organization <http://beginningfarmers.org/> (tons of info including Financing and Finding Land)

Choosing Heritage Breeds of Livestock For the Homestead

http://hubpages.com/hub/Choosing_Heritage_Breeds

Livestock <http://modernhomesteadingtoday.com/livestock.html>

Comparing the Five Best Backyard Animals <http://www.motherearthnews.com/Sustainable-Farming/1982-11-01/Comparing-the-Five-Best-Backyard-Livestock-Animals.aspx>

Animal Husbandry & Care Information <http://www.countryfarm-lifestyles.com/farm-animals.html>

Backyard Barnyard <http://urbanhomestead.org/journal/2009/02/13/backyard-barnyard-2/>

Small-Scale Livestock <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/animallinks.html>

Farm Animals http://www.journeytoforever.org/farm_animal.html

How to Find Free Livestock http://www.ehow.com/how_2200052_find-free-livestock.html

Livestock resources Cattle http://www.journeytoforever.org/farm_animal.html#res

Grazing Systems and Alternative Livestock Breeds

http://afsic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=2&tax_level=2&tax_subject=295&topic_id=1409

Dexter cattle http://www.journeytoforever.org/farm_animal.html#dex

Sheep http://www.journeytoforever.org/farm_animal.html#sheep

General http://www.journeytoforever.org/farm_animal.html#gen

Draft animals http://www.journeytoforever.org/farm_animal.html#draft

Pigs http://www.agbio.ca/NewspaperArticles/na_organic_pig.asp

Farming soil, Crops, Animals, Weeds, Worms, Water, Energy

http://www.journeytoforever.org/farm_library.html

Sustainable Production: Grower Resource List <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/chatham/ag/SustAg/booklist.html>

Sustainable Farming Connection <http://www.ibiblio.org/farming-connection/whatshot.htm>

**"Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands."
Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Jay (Aug. 23, 1785)**

From TNT - a 50 Something Prepper ;-}

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