

Upgrading an Existing Flock or Starting Anew?

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

Interactions with customers often trigger ideas for new articles. This one is no exception. A customer came to pick up his group of ten ewe lambs and a ram lamb. He had an existing flock but wasn't too pleased with it. Therefore, he considered starting anew and told me about it. I shook my head right away and suggested that upgrading with better rams is the better option. It is cheaper. Oh, had I just learned to keep my mouth shut during the past forty some years. The customer had already called the group he bought "awesome" and his wife would later describe them as "like a picture in *Farming Magazine*." I just killed a sale. The customer clearly had the money. What was I thinking?

The topic of upgrading kept me thinking for the rest of the day. Aside from being unable to keep my mouth shut, had I given the right advice? I myself started in the U.S. by upgrading a flock of "whatever-I-could-buy-cheaply-in-the-neighborhood." I then purchased a Texel ram for a lot of money and upgraded this mixed flock. I continued purchasing Texel rams over the next few years. Three generations later I had a flock that was pretty much Texel sheep. If you are young (as I was then) and have lots of time and you don't have much money to spare or to spend, this is a wonderful way to arrive cheaply at the desired goal. All you need is patience. Patience, however, is not exactly an American virtue.

I had long eyeballed Dorper sheep when they came into the U.S. in the 1990s, but I simply could not afford them. At least, I was unwilling to pay several thousand dollars for a ram. So I waited until prices for White Dorper rams came down. Ten years later they had come down and in 2005 I started over. I bought my first White Dorper rams, still priced at over \$1,000 per ram, and upgraded my Texel flock. For several years now I have had a purebred flock of White Dorper sheep. All it took was patience and spending money on new rams.

The first time around I had no choice other than upgrading my flock because I had just crossed the ocean and

had no money. The second time around I had an existing flock of wonderful sheep with a 200 percent lambing percentage, good mothering, thriving on grass, used to the existing internal parasites (meaning worms), and accustomed to my management. It would have been foolish to discard all of them in the latter case and start over. So if your flock is productive but you wish to go a different route, upgrading with new rams is the cheaper, more prudent, and smarter way to go. All you need is patience.

The picture is different when your flock is not productive. This is especially true when you have a disease in your flock you need to get rid of. Hoof rot or OPP (Ovine Progressive Pneumonia) come to mind. The same holds true if your sheep are simply too small or too wild or simply unsuitable for the management system you wish to implement. Then it might be a better idea to sell off your flock and start anew. I know a guy who sells awesome sheep that look like a picture in *Farming Magazine*....

Goats. Goats? Goats!

"Why do you have goats in your flock?" I am being asked that question quite often. I always have a short and a long answer at hand. Since I have paper with ink to fill, you get to hear the long story.

I am not new to goats. I used to tend them in the '90s back in Germany and had goats early on when I moved to the U.S. and lived in New Jersey. I remember letting a flock of 1,200 sheep through a gate at a ski lift I was tending in the Black Forest. The 50 or so goats went through first and headed straight for the lift to eat the flowers around the building. By the time the flock was through and I was able to leave my spot, it was too late. All flowers were gone. The park service was not amused. I remember these goats finding a hole in the hedgerow while tending this flock on a large hillside, running onto the road, and pulling all the sheep behind them. The road had a hill to the left and a steep decline on the right. That is not exactly a spot to send the dog in to hold the flock. By the time I managed, the goat buck had jumped onto the

hood of a brand-new car and had left some scratches. He was in no rush to come back down. The car owner was not amused. I remember having sheep for years in a pasture where the previous owner had started with one roll of woven wire on one side of a tree that grew in a Y-shaped form and had continued on the other side with the fence. This hole in the Y was undetected by the flock for years. The day I introduced goats, they found that hole within hours, went through, and in the process had the whole flock following, all now grazing in the neighbor's hay field. The neighbor was also not amused. I have about another dozen of these stories. You get the drift. Goats are trouble. I did away with them and was goat-free for many years. Meanwhile, I moved to upstate New York where I have a perimeter fence of woven wire. Above it, I have one strand of hot wire where I can hook in with a power link to electrify my temporary electric nettings. The energizer is a plug-in unit in the barn, and I have a remote control for it so I can turn the fence on and off from wherever I am on the farm. Works great. However, I am also living in wine country and "feral" vines grow everywhere, especially on my woven wire fence. Once these thousands of vines touch the electric strand and you get a nice rain, they drain the strand or wire of most of the electricity. In addition, I started having more undesirable weeds and invasive species that I needed to keep in check, like Virginia creeper, knapweed, multiflora rose, tartarian honeysuckle, Canadian thistle, pigweed, ragweed, curly dock, and burdock. While the sheep eat some of it, and Dorper sheep are excellent browsers compared to other sheep breeds, it was not enough. Goats on the other hand are browsers and prefer these weeds. They seek them out. So I figured I will bite the bullet and start over with goats. I just wanted something harder than my previous Boer goats. I didn't even consider sensitive dairy goats. I had heard of some New Zealand goats with this funny name that were bred out of feral goats. The name of the breed was Kiko, a word that means "meat" in the language of the



Feral vines along the fence line before...



during,




...and after the goats had access to them.

indigenous people. Sounded good to me. I searched for breeders. While most wanted to sell me overprized show stock or refused to de-horn them, I eventually found PJM goats in New Jersey and bought some de-horned doelings. Why de-horned? So they can reach through the woven wire and eat the weeds growing up and along the fence line. (It also works better when you have goats and sheep together in

the barn in the winter, as goats with horns will keep the sheep away from the hay feeders.) Thus far, the now 30-some goats (counting does and kids) are doing a swell job eating most of the weeds. The only one they don't want to eat is the Canadian thistle. Even when I fenced them in with a patch of thistles and not much else to eat, they refused. Well, sometimes you can't have it all.

I did find a few remarkable differences of these Kiko goats compared to other goats. First, they were much cold hardier than any other goat I have ever known. Secondly, they are a lot less heat sensitive than any other goat I have ever known. And lastly, they fit into my flock a lot better than any

other goat I have ever known. Don't get me wrong; a goat is still a goat. Yet, they have adjusted well to living with my White Dorper sheep and are not nearly as much of a nuisance as I was used to when raising goats. And did I mention that they taste really good? 

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.



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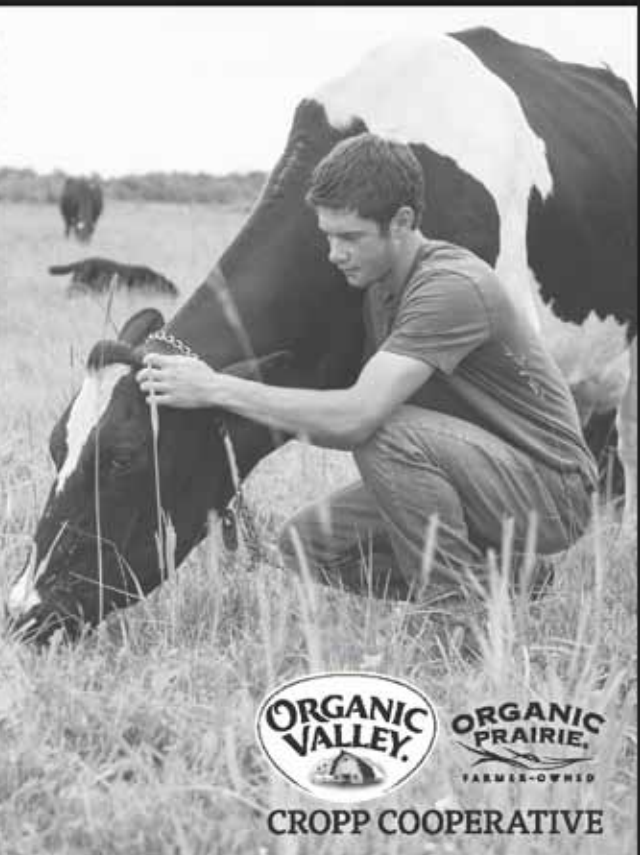


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