

To dehorn, or not to dehorn, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler for a goat to carry
His crowning glory in outrageous fashion,
Or to take a disbudding iron against a sea of troubles
And by removing, end them....

Horned or disbudded is often the first decision a person must make once they've decided to purchase packgoats. With babies, it is a choice that must be made within the first week or two because after that, horn removal is no longer an option. When purchasing older goats, horns (or lack thereof) may be the deciding factor on whether to buy or pass. There is no right or wrong answer. Both choices are equally valid and your decision depends on your particular needs.

Personally, I love horns. They are beautiful, they are natural to most goats, and I do not find horns difficult to manage. On other hand, some people find horns to be obnoxious at best and dangerous at worst. With that in mind, I'll outline some of the pros and cons to having horned goats so you can make the best choice for your herd.

+ Horns are beautiful. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of course, but very few people can deny that horned goats possess a regal, proud appearance not shared by their hornless counterparts.

- Aesthetics is not a compelling reason to add risk and management headaches to your herd.

+ Horns are natural to most goats (polled goats are naturally hornless but they are less common). If you are the sort of person who wants animals that are as close as possible to the way "nature intended" then horns are probably for you. Disbudding soon after birth is an effective way to permanently remove horns, but it is one of the most unpleasant experiences for goat owners and some people can't stomach it so they've defaulted to horns as a way to avoid disbudding.

- Most things we do with goats are not entirely natural (castration for example). Kids recover from the trauma of disbudding within a few minutes.

+ Horns are a goat's natural radiation system. The skull, sinus cavity, and major blood vessels run through the horns. The air and blood that circulates through them help cool a goat in warm temperatures or when he's exercising. Goats don't sweat like horses—they pant like dogs but are not as efficient at it. Many goat packers prefer to keep horns so their hard-working wethers can stay cooler while hiking.

- People who keep both horned and hornless goats generally don't see much difference in their goats' ability to cool off. Coat color, ear size, and breed impact body

temperature at least as much as having horns. A goat that gets too hot on the trail can have his coat clipped down.

+ Horns are a goat's natural defense. Goats can be more successful at fighting off dogs or coyotes if they have horns. Goats with horns are generally bolder around dogs than goats without them and are more likely to stand their ground or charge while a hornless goat is more likely to run.

- Horns don't guarantee that a goat won't be attacked or even killed by dogs or other predators (some people have learned this the hard way!). Good fencing at home and pepper spray or a stout stick on the trail are far better for keeping your goats safe than leaving his horns on. Hornless goats can still be trained to confront dogs.

+ Horns make it easier to restrain goats. You can slip an arm behind the horns and use them to anchor the goat when you need to give medication, etc. Horns also make it impossible for a goat to slip out of his halter or collar.

- Goats without horns can still be restrained and you don't have the added danger of an angry, berserk goat hitting or poking you with his horns in an effort to get away from worming paste. In some ways it's easier to restrain hornless goats because it can be hard to find a stanchion that accommodates horns.

+ Horned goats are easier to contain because once their horns reach a certain span they can't fit through gaps in fences or gates.

- Horned goats are hard to fence safely because young ones have a tendency to get their horns caught. Horned goats are also destructive on fences and sometimes learn how to use their horns to unlatch gates.

+ Horns encourage people to respect your goats. This can be especially important when encountering strangers on the trail. Some people can be much too "in your face" with animals they think are harmless. Horned goats make nearly everyone hesitate, stand back, and ask permission before petting. People are also less likely to crowd your goats when passing on the trail.

- Horns require you to be extra vigilant when people, especially children, approach your goats. Even a very gentle goat could poke someone by accident if he turns his head at the wrong moment. Using halters can help prevent these types of problems because when you control the head, you control the horns. But greater attention is still required when horned goats encounter the public.

When horns are involved, safety becomes a number one priority because it's very easy to have accidents. A hornless goat is one of the most defenseless creatures on the planet. Goats can't really kick or bite so removing the horns makes them one of the safest animals you can own. Add a set of horns and the goat becomes as potentially dangerous as a pony, so a certain amount of respect is in order, especially if children

are involved. Clothes and skin can be torn if you're not careful, and a spooked or unruly goat can easily stab someone. I personally wear eye protection when medicating horned goats "just in case." It's always important to watch where you put your face. A friend of mine got a black eye because she ducked under a fence and whacked her face on a goat's horn. I've also seen people get their wrists caught in the V between the horns when leading a goat directly by the collar.

Your farm management style also has to be considered. Young horned goats often get caught in fences, feeders, baling twine, and other things found around a farm. Horn-proofing your property can be difficult and expensive if your fences and barns are built without horns in mind. Horned goats are also very hard on fenceposts, trees, etc. Shelters need to be bigger with wider entrances, and feeders must be spaced further apart because horned goats are wider and they don't usually share space as well. Goats also like to use their horns to hook each other's collars so you either have to remove the collars or use collars that will break under stress.

When buying kids, make sure to talk to the breeder about disbudding. Many dairy goat breeders routinely disbud all their kids so if you want horns you need to specify this right away. They may require you to pay up front or take the kids early so they don't get stuck with horned kids they can't sell. Other breeders do just the opposite and only disbud if requested up front and given a downpayment. Most people find it's easiest to keep only horned or dehorned goats, but some have mixed the two types successfully with the right set-up.

Whatever choice you make, don't let other people talk down to you for it. Some folks are dead-set against horns under any and all circumstances while others think disbudding is a desecration. While they are entitled to their opinions, they have no right to tell you what's best for you and your herd. Do what you think is best for you and your goats' safety and happiness.