Dexters: The Ideal Family Cow

When most people think of cattle, they imagine them being used for beef or milk as a production animal. Dexters can do those things as well; however, there’s something unique about these cattle. Is it their lovable personality? Is it their small-but-mighty size? Maybe it’s all of these things. Either way, Dexters are one of the most wonderful creatures to walk this beautiful God-given earth. Their peaceful demeanor makes them the ideal family cow for a homestead, whether for milk, beef, or even draft. This essay will cover how my family started our small homestead and some of the basics of owning Dexters, such as when we started our farm, what my involvement is with our Dexters, a basic emergency kit for cattle, the necessary resources to raise healthy, well-nourished cattle, and my plans if I win this award.

Recently Dexter cattle have been growing in numbers exponentially across the United States. New owners seek advice from experienced owners, and the Dexter community is always here to support owners old and new; and, in 2011, that was us! We started out with two Dexter steers in a small electric fence enclosure in our backyard, as we did not have exclusive pastures for the cattle. The steers turned out to be perfect for our needs, and we opted to proceed by purchasing a small herd of heifers and cows from Tim and Delena Coy of Mammoth Cave Dexters: Mammoth Cave’s Louise, a black polled heifer; Mammoth Cave’s Sassafras, a red horned heifer; Dale Hollow’s Boudica, a traditional black horned cow; and Adanal’s Frankie, a black dehorned chondro cow. We quickly developed a fondness for the breed due to their docility and pet-like personality. Thanks to the variety of different colors and genes in our cattle, we had a colorful crop of calves our first year! We chose to use the AI process to breed the heifers, as we wanted to wait until we had more experience before choosing a bull. Any livestock owner knows how it feels to anxiously await a new calf. Despite the easy calving process Dexters are known for, it’s always difficult to wait for a calf, especially the first born on your farm. Nevertheless, on November 26, 2012, the first calf was born on our farm. Since then, we have been raising our Dexters for beef and dairy as well as to sell as breeding stock.

Spring and summer bring not only warm weather, but also the seasons of cattle shows and milking season. Milking is a seasonal task for us, as we milk from the spring until October or November when it begins to freeze. We prefer to milk early in the morning to start the day, and milking is followed by other farm chores such as letting the goats out of the barn for the day and opening the door in the chicken coop. Giving the cattle fresh water also becomes much more important in summer, and is another one of my assignments.

 One very enjoyable spring chore is halter training. If possible, we start working with the animals we are likely to bring to the shows in March or April. However, the weather does not always cooperate, and it’s mostly working with them whenever we are able to until a few weeks before the show. Halter training is a vital part of owning cattle; even if you don’t bring your cattle to shows, being able to walk your cow to another pasture or to the stanchion for milking on command is extremely helpful. Halter training provides you another opportunity to develop a closer relationship with your cattle. While training, you are spending time together so that you know what to expect from your cattle and your cattle know what to expect from you. It is amazing how much personality each Dexter has. The closer your bond with your animal is, the friendlier your cows will be.

Bonding and training are enjoyable; however, not every cattle moment is filled with joy and happiness. Imagine a scenario all too familiar for livestock owners: it’s late on a Sunday night, just after dark, on a holiday. The vet’s office and all livestock supply stores are closed. You have a cow that looks weak and is not eating, with a young calf standing nearby. What could you do?

If you have an emergency kit, you could be well prepared for a situation similar to this. As most emergencies always seem to take place when stores are closed, having a stock of antibiotics and supplemental injections could prove to be beneficial, or even life-saving. Standard first aid supplies such as wound spray and eye spray are a must. Several medications that are always useful to have on hand are: Banamine, an anti-inflammatory; Enroflox, a respiratory medication; BO-SE, a selenium/vitamin E injection; CAL-MAG gel, a calcium/magnesium gel; MultiMin 90, which consists of copper, zinc, selenium, and manganese; and Probios, a probiotic paste. Other specific vitamin and mineral supplements could be needed depending on your area, as certain areas have differing natural resources. However, despite your area, calcium is a substance all cattle owners should have on hand. Milk fever, caused by a calcium deficiency in cows that have recently given birth, occurs when the cow does not have enough calcium in her system. Milk fever can quickly become deadly if gone unnoticed, and is especially common in cows around ten years of age.

Aside from pharmaceuticals, you should also have a few rope halters. In an emergency situation, you should always be able to separate your animals if need be. If your cow is stable, you may need to bring it to the veterinarian, as many times they are too busy for house calls. Syringes to administer any necessary medication should be on hand as well.

Healthy Dexters are something every breeder should strive for. While grass-fed versus grain-fed has long been a controversial debate, we raise our cattle on pasture grass and hay, with some sweet mix for occasional treats. Fresh green pasture grass is what Dexters have thrived on for thousands of years. Since the arrival of winter in Ohio usually means lots of mud, we supplement our pasture grass with hay or baleage, a type of hay that is baled without drying to allow for fermentation. The fermentation process allows the cattle to digest it more efficiently than bales that are allowed to dry. However, it can often be heavier and more expensive, so it’s not for everyone. Our cattle also receive sweet mix and stocker-grower as a treat. We utilize it as a training tool when training heifers and as an aid to keep the milking cows happy while we milk. We typically add Calf Manna into the mix for our milking cows.

 Regardless of whether you are feeding grain or letting your cows graze on grass, protein tubs are essential. While many companies sell protein supplements tailored to your needs and area, you can find an all-purpose protein tub in various sizes at your local farm supply store. These contain vital nutrients that might not be found in your area. They can also help you know how the total nutritional content of your hay is performing for your cattle. When your cattle go through protein and mineral tubs at a fast rate, that can be indicative of nutritional shortages in your hay. Minerals and protein tubs sitting untouched show the grass and hay is taking care of your cattle’s nutritional needs.

 Something to watch out for, particularly if you grain feed, is overfeeding. Cattle can have many issues from too much grain, especially if they aren’t used to it. Conditions resulting from too much grain can vary from overweight cattle to bloating, a severe illness. Overweight cattle can have trouble breeding, problems with arthritis, temperature management and other complications. Acidosis, a variant of bloat, occurs when cattle ingest large quantities of grain. Unfortunately, we had to experience this situation firsthand when one of our cattle got into a bag of grain. Luckily, we caught it sooner rather than later, but she is still partially bloated from the experience over three years ago.

 As with any living creature, fresh water must be available at all times. In the heat of summer, we fill the water tubs usually three or more times a day, depending on the weather and how many cows are in the field. The importance of clean water cannot be stressed enough. Dexter cattle share many of the basic needs of other animals.

 If I am blessed to win this award, I plan to purchase some steers of my own. Last year, Josh Mink of JK Acres was generous enough to sell me a steer with the award money from the Junior Chris Odom Award. I would definitely like to add to my herd over the next few years. I would also like to purchase my own heifer to start adding some new bloodlines, and have a registered calf under my own name.

 Raising Dexter cattle is not just a hobby or a job for some, it’s often a way of life for breeders and owners. Dexter cattle have a calm temperament unlike any other breed of cattle, and each has its own unique personality. Any Dexter owner will testify that their hardiness and docility is uncommon in other breeds. Dexters are the perfect family cow for a small family homestead, but they also serve as beef animals on larger farms. The versatility of the Dexter cow has made it popular, with numbers growing over the past few decades.

I owe much of who I am to Dexters and the Dexter community, and for that, I am grateful.

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