



Part One: There is Poop

By Amy King

Those of us obsessed with knitting eventually begin to dream of owning a few animals from which to harvest fiber. We have visions of blissfully tending to sheep, goats, or what-have-you; spinning and dyeing fleece and fiber into gorgeous yarns that we will use to make all sorts of fabulous creations. In my case that dream belonged, not to me, but to my daughter. I was blissfully happy to purchase my fibers, thank you very much. But she had other ideas. What makes a kid campaign for goats instead of a puppy or a kitten? Who knows? She's a teenager and not very forthcoming about most things. Whatever the reasons she embarked on a two-year campaign to convince us that we needed goats and eventually we acquiesced. Because it's kind of a nice dream, right?

In my dream the goats were clean, loveable creatures that eat grass, are open to snuggling, and supply all the fiber one could ever hope to own. Mess didn't enter into the idealistic picture that I had created in my head. Cute barn, muffled noises, rolling green pastures—all without the compost pile. That was the vision. The reality is that there is poop. Lots of it. It ends up on your clothes, on your shoes, in your hair, and on your face. Don't ask me how it ends up in your hair or on your face. If I knew, I would be able to ensure that it never ever happened again. This is not a promise I am able to make to myself. I only promise to check every so often to make sure I clean it off as soon as possible.



There is poop. It ends up on your clothes, on your shoes, in your hair, and on your face. Illustration by Amy King.

I'm no stranger to farm life—I grew up on one owned by my grandparents where we tended cows, chickens, pigs, and the odd sheep or goat—but one forgets about the poop when the animals have been off the farm for more than 10 years. Ten poop-free years. No mucking stalls. No compost piles. No stuff clinging defiantly to your shoes. (Seriously, mud has nothing on poo.) And it's not like we weren't prepared. As part of her campaign to bring in the goats, my daughter centered a year's worth of her homeschooling on the subject. Goats factored into just about every report she did. Science was goat anatomy; chemistry involved in making cheese. All English essays had a goat theme, and every poem she turned in featured goats.

She was winning the goat argument, but I wanted to make sure the animals would be useful and have a good life without costing us an arm and a leg. Eventually the two of us took a class at Friend's Folly Farm, the place that would eventually supply us with our fiber goats. We learned about health and maintaining hooves, about worms, and general care. We chased down a few kids and cuddled. And that was the clincher. Cuddling this warm furry, curly, little snuggly beast was the end to all my objections. Two. We can have two goats.

Two goats came to live at the farm and the barn stayed quite clean. There weren't piles of mess everywhere, but what little byproduct there was, I became very concerned with it. Careful evaluation of goat poop, you see, is one of the keys to the animal's health and well-being. Could the goats have worms? Look at the poop. What color is it? What is the texture? I'd become inordinately concerned with the excrement of my lovely little pets.

I want to paint a picture for you about how this works. You want to test a particular animal and not necessarily all of them, and you want a fresh sample so you will have the best most accurate results. This means you follow the goat around with a plastic baggie on your hand, just waiting for them to poo so you can have a fresh sample to test.

Collecting fecal matter and wondering if the sample you have will be enough is now your life. Is it too brown? Too green? Too soft? You can tell a lot about the health of the animal just by looking at the poo. Sometimes you can see the worms (if you've had a cat, you might know how this works) and just by the color, you might be able to tell if they're eating too much or too little of one thing or another.

I've learned you want a good healthy, firm, dark brown, pebble-like poo coming from your goat. Yet still even if it looks terrific, you might have issues with a whole host of types of worms. Every so often you need to get a sample tested. You can do this at a lab, but can cost quite a bit so we decided to learn how to do the testing ourselves.



Careful evaluation of goat poop is key to the animal's health and well-being. Illustration by Amy King.

We purchased a modest microscope and some test tubes and then confiscated the scale, some cups, and the sieve from the kitchen. I won't detail the process involved in running this test, but suffice it to say, you don't want the strainer back in the kitchen ever again. It's not a particularly messy process, and it's pretty exciting when you look through the microscope and start counting up the parasite eggs. It feels like you've succeeded. Until you realize that by succeeding in finding parasites, you need to dose out medication.

I think I forgot to mention that in only a few short months, "we can have two goats," ended up as a herd of seven. No one gave birth. Nothing magical happened except that maybe my brain left my body for a moment. We have four goats bred to be milkers (pets) and three fiber goats. One might think that as a knitter I'd have more fiber goats than milkers. One would be wrong. This lopsided goat tally is a testament to the power of big, brown child eyes and massive, blue baby-goat eyes.

Seven goats. Seven goats, soon to be who-knows-how-many goats. As I write this, Miss Nikki is due to kid at any moment, and we aren't sure how many babies are in there. She's about as wide as she is tall and as flat as coffee table, so the popular guess around here is that there are three. By the time of publication my herd will have grown to eight, nine, ten, or maybe even eleven goats.

This many goats put out a lot of compost. Please don't misunderstand me. I enjoy the goats immensely, and I would happily have more when and if there is room for them all. The goats are a delight and joy. They are ridiculous and smart creatures. They know their names, and they may choose to come when they're called or they may not. They're really not all that different from my dogs. The babies of the bunch enjoy regular trips into my Mom's house where they headbutt their reflections on the oven door and then attempt to get into the fridge. I'm happy they don't have thumbs—they eat like teenage boys.



The poop is plentiful—and good compost. Illustration by Amy King.

My children dress the goats up and encourage their participation in plays for each successive holiday. All of these activities happen in the house. And yes, the goats do poop in the house, though the ones that regularly visit seem to do so less often. They're ushered outdoors whenever this occurs, so it seems as though they try to contain themselves when possible. If they are actively holding it to be in the house, then they might be smarter than one of my dogs. In the barn, there's

no such restraint. The day and night shifts are running overtime all the time to make sure the poop is plentiful. If you have need of fertilizer, I know where you can get some.

Amy King is the dyer at Spunky Eclectic (www.spunkyelectic.com) and chief goat herder of her family's little hobby farm. The goats, however, think they're in charge of themselves. There's never a dull moment.