



Tips for the First 4-H Livestock Project

How does a 4-H youth select which livestock project to complete for their first experience? There are many considerations for children in families who have no livestock background when youth take on their first 4-H livestock project. Some of the first questions to answer before committing to a project animal include “Which species and type of project do I select?,” “Where do I find my project animals?,” “What kind of facilities do I need?,” and “How do I take care of my animals?” This factsheet will present answers to these questions.

Which Species—Goat, Sheep, Swine or Cattle?

Before you begin planning for a livestock project, check your local government zoning laws. It is important to make sure your neighborhood or community allows the species you select to be kept on your property. The county zoning office should be able to help.

Each livestock species can have very different requirements for feeding, housing and health. Two of the largest concerns for first-time 4-H members pursuing livestock projects are **space** and **facilities or housing**. How much space do you have? Do you have any existing facilities to provide shelter for animals?

Large animals can require significant space and all animals must be able to move around to get exercise. Adequate space, ventilation and exercise are essential for both sound animal health and safety when handling and working with livestock. Like people, if animals do not move around appropriately, they can suffer health issues. They can also be difficult to handle. It is essential to answer the space and facilities question **before** beginning a project.

Small ruminants, especially goats, tend to be a successful initial project for 4-H members. They do not require as much space as some other species and may be easier for those with limited animal experience. Meat goats are a popular choice, and



crossbreeds are quite common as 4-H market goat project animals. Table 1 provides some essential considerations for each species.

Market Project or Breeding Stock?

The primary goal for market projects is meat production. Breeding stock projects involve breeding and raising offspring. All livestock projects require a commitment of time and hard work to complete. Much more knowledge and expertise is required for breeding projects than for market projects. A market project is a short-term project lasting for 4-11 months while a breeding project is a year-round commitment. Breeding projects are not recommended as an initial 4-H livestock project type for those without sufficient and appropriate experience.

Youngsters may change their interests rapidly, so a market animal project has some distinct advantages. First, it has a limited duration, since the goal is to grow the animal to harvest weight and sell it. A market project also has the potential to provide some income for the 4-H member once the animal is sold at auction. Some fairs hold 4-H livestock auctions to provide a “payday” for youth and an opportunity for members of the community to support 4-H youth programs.

Species	Space/animal (Max during Production)	Essential Facilities	Feeding Program	Particular Concerns	Purchase Price of Animal+
Cattle	2 acres/hd** quality forage for grazing + 100 ft ² /hd for enclosed housing + 125 ft ² /hd for exercise***	Pasture, shade, minimal shelter	Grain, pasture, hay	Large animals— safety is of paramount concern. It is critical that handlers are experienced	\$700 up
Goat	.3 acres/hd** quality forage for grazing + 25 ft ² /hd for enclosed housing + 50 ft ² /hd for exercise***	Pasture, shade, minimal shelter	Grain, pasture, hay	Tend to be hardy but can be very susceptible to internal parasites	\$125 up
Sheep	.3 acres/hd** quality forage for grazing + 25 ft ² /hd for enclosed housing + 50 ft ² /hd for exercise***	Pasture, shade, minimal shelter	Grain, pasture, hay	Shearing/fleece handling may be an added concern	\$150 up
Swine	8-10 ft ² /hd** if confined	Sturdy, secure pens, shade essential	Grain-based ration	Secure pens/fences essential; very prone to heat exhaustion	\$50 up

Table 1. Species highlights to help you choose a 4-H project animal*

* These are general guidelines. Many factors must be considered in your decision.

+ The purchase price of animals varies GREATLY. Age, breed, weight, location, supply, demand, weather and MANY other factors come into play. These figures are purely starting points. Costs for feed, care, facilities, equipment, hauling, and other will increase the cost of producing the project. Careful budgeting is critical.

**hd=head (per animal)

***Effective fencing is critical. Security and safety are of utmost concern and there may be various options.

Purebred or Crossbred?

The decision to raise purebred vs. crossbred animals is largely personal preference. Like any business decision, you need to make sure there is a market for your 4-H livestock project animal. For a breeding project, the marketable product is offspring. Meat is generally the final product for market projects. In selecting a breed or composite of breeds, keep in mind that the goal is to produce what someone wants to purchase. Typically, crossbred market project animals grow faster and are hardier than purebreds.

Purebred animals are usually more expensive to purchase, but that is highly variable. Depending on the choice of breeds, animals may be available locally. Transportation costs for animals purchased from distant locations can be substantial. Look locally first, to determine if you can find the breed of animal that you want for your project. Using online resources and breed registry networks may provide helpful information, as well as consulting your 4-H livestock project leaders and peers.

Where Can I Find My Project Animals?

Auctions are one possible source of animals for a 4-H livestock project. Some auctions will have full information about the source of the animals (pedigree, birthdate, health history, etc.), and others will have none. It depends on the type of auction. There are some auctions that may be quite pricey; others may be reasonable.

Do your homework before purchasing your animals. Find out what appropriate prices are for different species you are interested in purchasing. Checking market reports, looking at online auctions, and talking with other 4-H families may give you some insight

about what is a fair price to pay for a given animal. Understand that auctions can be risky in terms of animal health versus buying directly from a breeder, especially if there are multiple breeders mixing animals together at the auction location.

Buying animals from a specific person or farm (private treaty) is another option. Private treaty sales are done with the buyer and seller working together, to determine a price that both are satisfied with. Purchase your animals from a reputable, trustworthy producer. Animals should look healthy, be lively, and show signs of being well-cared-for. Take a look at the full operation where you purchase animals, if possible. Facilities must be safe and functional. The condition and health of animals at an operation is critical. Look carefully at all animals besides the stock you wish to purchase when you visit livestock operations.

Fancy or Costly Facilities are not Important

Sound, secure fences are essential. Remember that fences should keep animals in and people out. Both are important concerns for the safety of animals and humans. Facilities must be functional and provide protection from severe hot and cold weather for all species. The shelter does not need to be elaborate. It can be as simple as a lean-to for most species. If animals are confined to shelters, there must be adequate ventilation and air flow to keep animals healthy. Breeding animals tend to need more confinement, especially during the birthing process.

Feeding Animals Properly is Essential for Their Health

Be sure to use a feed that meets the nutritional needs of the species of animal and its stage of growth. For example, a newly-weaned kid does not require the same kind of or amount of feed that a mature doe needs. Carefully READ FEED TAGS! The amount of feed required for an animal depends on the feed's nutritional value. Feeding medicated feeds should be done ONLY AS RECOMMENDED by a veterinarian and you must follow **WITHDRAWAL TIMES**.

Water is the most important nutrient to provide for animals. Without water, animals cannot live. Be sure to provide adequate amounts of clean, fresh water at ALL TIMES. Heat causes animals to need more water, so be mindful of water supply during hot weather. Frozen water sources also can be a

problem. Keep water free flowing, and thawed in cold weather. Water consumption can have a direct effect on feed consumption and dirty water can lead to poor growth rate and other health issues.

To assure animals are healthy, be sure to tend to your animals and to carefully observe them every day. Knowing the normal



behaviors of each species you raise is essential. Being aware of how your individual animals act/react is critical to providing proper care. Learn about potential diseases for your species and watch for any problems or abnormalities.

Take advantage of learning opportunities to improve your knowledge of animal health, including completing the required MD 4-H Animal Husbandry and Quality Assurance Training. Be sure to select a **veterinarian** before you have an emergency. The veterinarian-client relationship is very important and you will need to have animals “vet-checked” prior to taking them to fairs/shows. Don't wait until the last minute to select a veterinarian.

The More Information You Have, the Better

Each livestock species has different requirements. Do your homework before deciding on your 4-H livestock project. Taking on a 4-H livestock project is a commitment to the animal. Check out the laws in your county and requirements in your community about animals that are allowed. Learn about the species requirements before buying animals. Facilities to house your animals do not have to be expensive, but they must be functional, safe and secure. Proper handling, daily feeding, constant watering and attention to detail when caring for animals are critical concerns for the success of 4-H livestock projects. Following the information in this fact sheet will help

you enjoy and have success with your 4-H livestock project. Good luck with your project!

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