



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KIM HUNTER

Rocko, left, and two of his co-workers from The Green Goats gobble up buckthorn brush and burdock.

Get your goat

Got a lot of terrain to clear? These mighty munching machines are an eco-friendly option

BY MARGARET LITTMAN
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In the heat of the summer, the novelty of planting, digging and weeding has worn off. Plants are wilting. The back corner that you have been struggling with for years is overtaken with English ivy — again — and it is too hot to figure out what to do about it.

Just one word may solve your midsummer dilemma: goats. Yes, as in Billy Goats Gruff. These domesticated animals have a reputation for eating everything in sight. That's not a great quality when it comes to manners. But when it comes to clearing a landscape, that's a positive trait, and a growing number of goat farmers are capitalizing on this natural tendency to help urban and suburban gardeners.

If walking a dog or cleaning the litter box is all the animal responsibility you can handle, don't worry. Using goats to aid in your landscaping chores doesn't mean you have to become a goatherd. Across the country, there are folks who will rent a goat (or two or 15 or 50, depending on the size of a project) to help you toil in your garden.

"Many of our invasive plants come from Europe and Asia and are the natural food for goats," said Kim Hunter, who has a herd

of 90 goats at The Green Goats (thegreengoats.com) in southern Wisconsin. Hunter's goats are used in private and public projects, often to restore native habitats.

What's more, she adds, the approach "uses no chemicals and leaves a low carbon hoofprint."

Goats can be used for a variety of tasks, from clearing an overgrown spot where you want to put a patio to keeping on top of the mowing. There are few plants that goats won't eat, says Jean-Marie Luginbuhl, associate professor of crop science and animal science at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. (Although a few, like rhododendron and azalea, can be poisonous.) They can handle terrain that's tough for humans or motorized equipment, such as steep grades or land with rocks.

Goats are best used for "targeted grazing," says William Getz, professor of animal science at Georgia's Fort Valley State University, which has an on-campus goat farm. Getz said the goats are used more often to reclaim areas overrun with invasive vegetation such as Chinese privet, kudzu and various weeds that goats and sheep like.

"The application to gardening would be in the matter of weed management during the fallow season," he said, "and the 'auto-

matic application' of recycled nutrients (manure) on the land in order to maintain fertility and build organic matter."

"Goats will eat for eight to 12 hours a day if you let them," adds Alix Bowman, owner of Durham, N.C.-based Goat Patrol (thegoatpatrol.com). Bowman takes her herd of 18 goats to urban properties in need of tending for about \$250 per day. Many goatherds stay overnight with their flock, but Bowman takes them back to the farm and returns in the morning to comply with urban livestock laws. (Even ordinances that prohibit ownership of goats generally allow for short-term rentals, says North Carolina State's Luginbuhl.) Bowman and others add that neighbors are typically interested in the novelty of the goats, and don't mind, as long as they have been warned in advance.

Other goatherds charge as little as \$2 per day per goat, with fees based on the project. D'Goat Ranch in Fielding, Utah, (dgoats.com) has 1,600 goats to rent for various residential and public works projects, and many of its clients in the arid climate use them for landscaping for fire control as well as weed control.

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Looking for a goatherd?

Kim Hunter, a Glenbrook North graduate, started The Green Goats grazing service a few years ago at Fossil Ridge Farm in Kenosha County, Wis. For fees and information, visit thegreengoats.com or call 262-537-2234.

Things to consider

Before you chuck the hoe and mower for a four-legged helper, consider this:

Green times three: Goats are an alternative to power tools. That means no motorized lawn mowers or weed trimmers to guzzle fuel or create noise.

Also, goats help you reduce and possibly eliminate the use of herbicides and other chemicals.

Depending on the project, there won't be much to haul away. Instead, the goats process what they eat and fertilize the land.

Aesthetics: "Goat kids begin to graze at 7 days old, and a baby goat is the cutest landscape worker you will ever meet," The Green Goats' Kim Hunter says.

Repetition is necessary. Depending on what you have growing and what you're planning, you'll likely need the goats back once or twice to keep invasive plants from returning. Some goat farmers, including D'Goat Ranch's Jason Garn, recommend waiting until the next season to plant the new garden, so that the goats can do a follow-up graze to prevent further regrowth.



One of Kim Hunter's goats hard at work.

Follow-up. Goats don't remove plant roots; you'll have to dig those up if you plan to plant something else in the same spot. Some services do this for a fee.

They eat (almost) everything. Yes, that's one of the advantages too. Goats are not discriminating, so they will eat plants you love as well as

weeds you don't. Tobi Kosanke has 13 rescued goats on her Crazy K Farm (crazykfarm.com) in Hempstead, Texas. "If you paid any money for something, they'll eat it," she said.

Escape artists. Goats can get out of almost any kind of fence, even barbed wire, Garn says. Thus, they need supervision, if not by the goatherd, then by you. Goatherds typically install temporary electrical fences for the duration of a job. (Free advice: Garn says if you can't find one of your goats, look up. They like to climb. He almost always finds them on top of a hillside. Or a roof.)

Mother Nature rules. If you have lots of rain in a year after the goats dined on your weeds, the plants may come back faster. "Don't be surprised if it looks worse the second year than first. ... You took away plants, exposed soil and then had it fertilized and watered by goats," Garn says. "It will look worse before it looks better. But, in the end, that's a good thing."

— M.L.