

# Mum or granny?

## Maternal instincts in the dairy goat!!

**F**or many of us (but not all), December is a bit of a tease in the kidding/lambing calendar: the previous season's ups (and downs – hopefully not too many of these) are a bit of a dim and distant memory and the forthcoming excitements of new kids and lambs are just a little bit too far off. And yet there is also much pleasure to be had looking after your (hopefully) now in-kid and in-lamb livestock and making sure they are fit, healthy and have all they need, to ensure their growing youngsters are getting the best possible start. It is also a time for reflection and to consider how the coming year's lambing and kidding will hopefully be even better than the last.

We had an interesting time of it this last year: lambing (we have just the two ewes) all went beautifully (once we'd got over the shock of the lamb with no anus – see the PGSA Summer magazine). We had two deaths amongst the pygmy kids though, one inside a nanny and one outside (she did not survive her first night) – very grim on both counts and the words from the vet: 'it happens', did not seem at all adequate!!! We also had our CLA scare – see the Autumn PGSA. Our surviving six pygmy goat kids were all fabulous mind you, easily sold and in their brief 12 weeks with us provided many happy hours of entertainment.

It was the dairy goats that were to provide

us with the biggest challenges!! We have four: Curds (aged six), her two daughters Cheddar and Gorge from 2013 and Pickle (aged three). All are AN crosses (ish) and much loved pets as well as providing us with plenty of milk for our cheese making! They were all in kid aside from Curds as we had decided to give her a year off. In fact we were unsure if we would be putting Curds to the billy ever again, due to clicky knees and a bout of mastitis that left her with just one working quarter (or half!). As it turned out Curds had other ideas about our decision not to allow her to be a mum this year!!

Our mini herd live communally and we have always allowed them to choose where to kid (outside, in one of their paddock shelters or inside our barn). First to go into labour was Cheddar (in one of the paddock houses) and we actually missed the main event, arriving just in time to see some determined licking and cleaning going on and wobbly efforts to find mum's teats. The trouble was that half of the licking going on was being done by Curds who seemed rather determined to claim one if not both the kids as her own. We hastily moved Cheddar and her new family to a stall in the barn and left Curds in the paddock – reminding her that

she was the 'granny' NOT the mum, and when mum wanted to show the new kids to 'granny' she would!!

Cheddar bonded beautifully with the soon-to-be-named Bramble and Berry (dad was Briar so we had a theme...) and after two days we felt it was okay to put them all back with the herd. Within a week Gorge and Pickle had also given birth and we had six very bonny kids. Curds meanwhile was NOT playing the dotting granny with all six, she was still very much interested in just Berry and Bramble. The kids themselves went to Cheddar for their milk and slept with her at night but during the day they were often to be found curled up with Curds!! For the first few weeks, it was all rather sweet!!!

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Suckling the right mum



Curds with her own kid



And then one day around week four, we spotted Bramble suckling Curds - it was quite a short suckling and we assumed Bramble thought she'd try her luck and having had no joy, simply wander off. A couple of days later however, BOTH kids were spotted suckling Curds - one at a time but both on the 'good' teat. We got Curds to stand still in the field, knelt down, had a squeeze and were shocked to find ourselves able to milk her!!! It appeared that the maternal hormones had gone into serious overdrive here!! We checked Cheddar who was still milking fine although we had by this stage noticed that she was getting a little out of condition.... (not unusual in first time kidders).

We decided to let nature run its course – none of the animals seemed stressed by this arrangement and as Cheddar had lost some weight we agreed if Curds was able to provide the kids with milk as well, it might actually take a bit of pressure off Cheddar herself!

And so the summer continued, the kids flourished, Curds flourished, Cheddar unfortunately lost a bit more weight and when the time came for the kids to go to their new homes, we had 'two' mums that protested that day. We then of course had the issue that we had FOUR, not three goats to milk and eventually dry off. At her peak in previous years Curds had given us up to EIGHT litres of milk a day and so consequently had always been hard to dry off. It was (and is) however fabulous milk that always produces a higher



The wonderful curds

volume of cheese than Pickle's (litre for litre). We dried off Cheddar very quickly to help her regain condition and having made lots of cheese are now starting to dry off the rest.

At the time of writing (early October) we are however, still slightly struggling as to which of the dairy goats should go to the billy this year (pygmies and sheep sorted already) – our main purpose for breeding the dairy goats is, as said, to get milk for our cheese making and Curds is the best for that. She is in great condition now after a year of not being pregnant, her knees have been very quiet

and we know now that she will still produce a lot of milk... decision decisions - which by the time you read this, will have been made (we hope) – assuming that is we get a good billy, which in itself is not always easy. That perhaps is for another article...

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