

Livestock Guardians



Stone Fall Farm Winchester, KY © Desiree Rowe

By Shawn Harper

Livestock guardians can be an integral part of a sheep or goat operation. They can be very effective against the top predators, dogs and coyote, as well as bobcats, fox eagles and buzzard. The main guardians used are donkeys, llamas, and dogs. Each of these can be effective but, there are some important considerations to use in selecting the appropriate one for your situation.

Donkeys

Donkeys are very useful when protecting against dogs or coyotes. Miniatures should not be used because of their size. Jacks can be very aggressive so it is best to use a gelding or jennet. It is important to start with a young donkey or use one that has been raised with sheep and/ or goats. They work best alone because they will bond to the animals they protect better. If there are multiple donkeys they tend to socialize

and stay to themselves and may not be where they can protect the sheep and goats.

Donkeys are foragers and are able to eat with the sheep or goats and do not require special feed. If Rumensin is used in the feed, care must be taken to ensure none goes to the donkeys. They are not ruminants and it will kill them.

It would be best if anyone considering donkeys for protection has experience with equine. Hoof care is very important, and donkeys should also be on a proper vaccination and deworming program. Donkeys sleep at night so if your predator problem is at night, they may not be the best option. They also can be very loud and stubborn. Basic halter training is very valuable when using donkeys as it can make things much easier when moving or trimming feet.

Llamas

Llamas are very curious, thus can be very intimidating to other animals.



Llamas by Philippe Roca ©

Because their digestive system is much the same and they are also foragers, they are able to eat with the sheep and goats.

Like the donkeys, llamas sleep at night. If the predators are active at night or are very aggressive they may not be very affective as guardians. They can spit for up to 10 feet, and can kick and paw predators, but if the predators are

very aggressive then they can be very vulnerable, much like sheep or goats.

It is also best to start with a single young llama or an older one that has bonded with sheep or goats. Geldings or females should be used. Intact males can be aggressive. Llamas breed lying on the ground, thus intact males will actually rape sheep and goats after mounting them and knocking them to the ground. Alpacas should not be used as guardians because of their size.

Dogs

For most people guardian dogs are the best choice. They are nocturnal and work at night when many predators are active. They are very independent and normally need little shelter. They work very well in groups. They can be either guarders or patrollers; the guarders tend to stay with the sheep or goats and guard them, while patrollers go out looking for predators in their area. Good fences are important to teaching them their boundaries.

Like any other dogs they will need dog food and regular vaccinations. They can be aggressive when they feel like they or their livestock are threatened. It may be necessary to separate them when working your sheep and goats. If you have several close neighbors with pet dogs, guardian dogs can cause a problem by barking at night.

Guardian dogs are not pets. While it is important to socialize them and get them used to being handled, they have a job. They need to be raised in the barn with their charges and bond with them. It is good to have multiple dogs working together. Younger ones will learn from the older ones and it is always good to keep younger ones learning.

Prices can vary greatly. Normally higher prices are for adult working dogs. Rare breeds and registration may also affect price. Non-registered or grade dogs can be just as effective as registered animals, and at a much lower price. Common breeds for the area, as well as younger dogs, will be priced more economically. "Free" dogs are not normally the best option. Most have not been raised with sheep or goats and do not make good guardians.

There are many different breeds of guardian dogs available. Some of the most common in the United States are: Akbash, Anatolian Shepherd, Great Pyrenees, Kangal, Komondor and Maremma. When selecting a breed one should research

each breed to find out which will suit their situation the best. Some important considerations are: guarding characteristics, aggressiveness, hair length, health history of breed, size and the climate most suited for them. Other producers are a good resource for information.

Livestock guardians can be very useful in protecting flocks for sheep and goat producers. Care should be taken in selecting the proper guardian for each situation. Personal preference may be a key part of selection, but there are many factors to consider before making a final selection.

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Guard dog. Photo provided by Jim Mansfield

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