

Sometimes a low tech approach is best—goats happily eat many of our most challenging weed species, climb steep slopes with ease and do not involve chemicals or result in noise pollution. Using goats is excellent for public relations and will raise the profile of weed control efforts. Because goats do not grub out root systems treatment across multiple years or a multi-tiered or IPM approach is still necessary for most weed problems.

How does it work?

Call the goat company to discuss the particulars of your project—sometimes a site visit is required to quote larger jobs. Frequently companies have minimum requirements—one local company requires a three day minimum and a herd of 60. After deciding upon a strategy—how many goats for how long—the company will deliver the goats to the property. A temporary enclosure—an electric fence—is erected to contain the goats. The electric fence is battery powered for remote applications. Most companies will also have a shepherd onsite 24 hours a day to manage the goats. Fees vary—one company charges \$1100 for a herd of 60 goats for three days.

Goats are excellent to use in areas where steep slopes, existing trees and other site features limit access by machinery. Goats are also well suited for areas that include wetlands and streams—goats create very limited impact in these areas and any areas of concern can also be fenced out. Goats are a pesticide-free alternative for weed control in sensitive areas and they do not compact the soil.

What species do goats eat?

Goats eat both woody and herbaceous species voraciously! Goats happily eat some of our most problematic weeds including Himalayan blackberry, morning glory/bindweed, English ivy, knotweed, thistle and Scotch broom. Goats will even eat reed canary grass—although goats will not feed for long in standing water. Three days and 250 goats can address about 1–2 acres of an infestation in western Washington.

Limitations

Goats will not eat the thick, woody blackberry canes. They will strip the foliage but you will have to remove the canes manually. Goats are non-selective feeders. If the area also contains desirable plants, each plant must be temporarily fenced off with chicken wire or hardware cloth to prevent damage from the herd. Desirable plants that are fed on by goats usually do not die—most will resprout once the goats are removed from the site. Goats cannot eat an uninterrupted diet of a single species for multiple weeks on end— the diet may have to be supplemented with hay or other feed. Goats have the potential to become a meal for local wildlife in more rural situations—coyotes, in particular, can be a problem. One firm has a border collie that can help protect the herd from predators.

Contact information for local companies

Goat Trimmers (www.goattrimmers.com) is based in Tacoma, WA. Call Don at 877-289-5126 or email admin@goattrimmers.com.

Healing Hooves (www.healinghooves.com/) is based in Edwall, WA and regularly does work in western Washington. Visit the website or call 509-990-7132.

Rent a Ruminant (www.rent-a-ruminant.com) is based on Vashon Island. Email Tammy at info@rentaruminant.com.

Contact other goat farms and ranches in your area and inquire about brush and weed control services.