

Dexter Milk Cow

by Jaci Rice

So you think you want a milk cow. Many out there have had this romantic notion of milking their own cow and then when reality sets in it isn't quite what they imagined. Unless you have milked a cow or grown up around them it is difficult to imagine the responsibility.

Milk cows are a lot of work. Milking is a twice a day job, 365 days a year (cows don't stop giving milk on holidays or because the weather is bad outside!). Then we have the issue of the tail that inevitably slaps you in the face- of course it was covered with manure. How about the effort put into milking only to have the bucket now near full, kicked over. Imagine the heat and sweat of summer, a stuffy barn and flies biting both you and the cow. Then there is the cold winter, frozen fingers and your prize cow not very understanding of cold hands on her udder!

If none of the above has halted your idea of "wouldn't it be great to have our own milk cow" then a milking dexter is definitely the ideal cow for you. I have been milking our dexter cow "Jazzi" for 5 years now. It has never been a decision we've regretted making. I will admit that I had somewhat of that romantic notion of milking my own cow but that was also tempered with the fact I grew up on a farm and had milked cows as a very young child. I was not totally without knowledge of what I was getting into.

I have been asked a few times over these last few years to provide information regarding milking the dexter cow. I've pondered this many times as to what I could possibly say about milking a cow. I am not an expert at all on dexter cows. I chose this breed because of size and maintenance. I grew up around Angus/Simmental cross animals. Large animals that could hurt you without ill will towards you. I can't tell you how many nights I went without sleep as a teenager. In the dead of winter we were calving in Nebraska and I had to help yet another cow calve! The dexters calve without help and are up and going so much sooner because it usually isn't a stressful delivery. Both mother and newborn tolerate the process a lot easier.

After reading an article in Mother Earth News about the dexter breed that was all it took. I began searching on the internet and found a breeder in Nebraska. It wasn't long after that we were on our way to pick up our cow and her calf. Oh, what an exciting day that was. My very own milk cow, with a calf at side and she was bred again! We couldn't have gotten a better deal to start off our "little herd". The Lord was gracious to us and brought us to Jeff and Melinda Chambers farm around Lincoln, NE. They were and have been wonderful to work with through the years. They both have provided valuable information regarding this breed and not just to our family. I had discussed with Jeff that I really wanted a cow that I could milk and get a calf off of now and then for the meat. He happened to have "Jazzi" who had calved and was "fresh" with milk and that is how our adventure began.

I'll try to answer a few questions that seem to be frequent about milking. I am by no means an expert on this subject but will share some things I have learned over the years.

1. Do you need a stall to milk a dexter? No. It depends on your cow. I've seen some people milk out in the pasture and the cow doesn't really mind. I milk my dexter in a stall; she has a tendency to kick when she thinks she should be done being milked.

2. What kind of a stall or stanchion do you need to milk? My husband built me a milking stall by attaching a big metal tube gate to the back wall of our barn so it would swing open and shut. Then he attached a chain at the open end by the gate. The cow can walk right in and you can pull the gate shut and hook the chain so she can't move much. I do have a feed tub and give my cow a little corn while milking. It keeps her happy, and most often times she is waiting at the gate at milk time to come get her "treat". I would say it would be nice if you could have a "ramp" that the cow walks up on to "raise her up a bit". As the dexter is a shorter cow it would be a little easier if you elevated her a little. This is not a necessity, I don't have an elevated milk stall but when planning would be something to give thought to.

3. How do you break a cow to milk? It is not a hard process but you have to have patience. A cow that has never been milked doesn't know what you want her to do. I think it is safest for the person milking and the cow to have some sort of a stall, at least at first. Simply put her in the stall, with or without feed and milk her twice a day at least 10 hours apart. She may kick but in a stall it is difficult for her to kick the milker. My experience having broken 2 dexters to milk is that by the second milking they are realizing it isn't such a bad experience, especially if they get a little treat. Occasionally you will have a less than cooperative cow that will continue to try and kick you. If this happens to you, have someone hold her tail straight up in the air while you milk.

Cows can't or won't kick if you do this. When you hold the tail up this puts pressure on their spine and if they try to kick it will pinch a nerve causing them pain thereby they won't kick. I have used this a few times and it does work. You won't have to do it all the time, just when needed and the cow will learn it is easier to cooperate. Cows generally only kick when something is bothering them after they are broke to milk. Either they are sore and you are in too big a hurry and causing them pain, perhaps you are pulling a little hair around the udder, or your hands are cold in winter. Try to find out what the cause is and adjust so you are both in a better mood.

4. How do you get the cow to "let down" her milk? Usually the cow will do this just because you stimulate her by milking, especially an older cow. Sometimes with a young cow this response isn't quite there yet. The calf stimulates her to "let down" her milk by "butting" her or pushing on the udder. You can simulate this by doing the same thing. I don't mean punching her but pushing up firmly on the udder and then milking the "teat". It won't always happen immediately, it can take a couple of minutes but you will certainly know when the milk has started to come! Generally this let down period only lasts 10-12 minutes and this is when you want to do your best milking. You will continue to get milk after this period but the let down period is over and you are just milking out the udder. You also want to be sure when you think you are finished that you "strip" each teat. By this I mean you take a couple last strokes on each teat to make sure they are empty. This helps to ward off mastitis.

5. How often do you have to milk? It is best to milk twice a day. Morning and evening. It should be 10-12 hours apart. You also need to keep the same time. If you milk at 7am and 7pm, you need to keep as close to those times as possible. Milking 10 minutes early occasionally won't hurt but it does affect your cow's milk supply. If you try 30 minutes early or late etc. you won't get as much milk as you usually do. Cows are creatures of habit. She will know the routine very quickly and will most times be waiting at the gate for you. I have read of people

trying to milk once a day and have been successful at this. I have tried it one time myself and it was “ok”. I felt like my milk supply really dropped off after 3-4 days. I could not be sure this was the total cause as I was kind of starting to let her dry up before she calved again. I prefer twice daily milking to keep them going.

6. Can you drink the milk you get when she first calves? Technically yes you could. The cow puts out colostrum just like humans. I have found that with mine it takes 4-6 milkings for the colostrum to be done. The calf won't take all the milk at first. Usually they will only nurse on two teats which will leave two for you. I milk out the colostrum and freeze it. I give it to any of my animals when they are sick and they come right back. You will know the colostrum is done because it is thicker than milk and will have a pink to yellow color.

7. Do you leave the calf on the cow while milking? Calves will usually only nurse on two teats leaving you two to milk and plenty of milk for the family. As the calf grows it may start nursing throughout the day on all four teats just because it can. At this point I usually take the calf away from the mom and bottle feed so I can control the milk. Some people will separate the calf from the mother before bed, milk first and then put the calf back with the mother. This works fine also. You'll decide what works for you. Around two-three months I'll separate the calf and use a bottle. If you do this don't expect that you can turn the calf back in with the mother. After having separated them for 3-4 days they usually won't let the calf back on to nursing, I know there are always the exceptions!

8. Do I have to do anything special to the udder before I milk? Simply wipe the udder off. Use a bucket with warm water and a rag if it is really covered. Most times it will be fairly clean and I use a soft brush or rag to wipe it off before milking. It is a good idea in winter to have some “udder balm” on hand. Just as your hands get chapped so does your cows teats. I apply this after milking daily and that takes care of it. You can apply this even when you have a calf nursing it won't hurt the calf.

9. Okay, I'm squeezing but I don't get any milk, should I squeeze harder? Only if you want to get a prompt kick! I will admit there is a knack to milking but it is not an impossible principle to learn. I learned at the age of 4 years old as have many others before me. You need to know a little bit about a cow udder to understand what you are trying to accomplish. How hard you squeeze has little to do with milking. Where the cow's teat attaches to the udder you place your hand around that teat firmly. Using your thumb and index finger you “pinch” at the top of that teat and by “rolling” down through the rest of your fingers with firm pressure you will get a stream of milk. There is a duct that runs from the udder to the teat. You want to pinch off at the top of the teat to prevent the milk from going back up into the udder so it will go out, into your bucket. You will know if you haven't done this correctly because you can feel the milk go back up into the udder. This can eventually cause damage to the udder if it happened all the time. Having this happen when you are just learning to milk is not long enough to cause damage. Patience above all will get you through this. I did see in Mother Earth News an ad for a “milker”. It was just a suction sleeve attached to a jar with a handle you would squeeze back and forth that would then milk the cow. I have not tried this but it did look like it was designed so it would work. I have heard that some people have used equipment that they use to milk goats with

on the dexter cow and it works fine but have no experience with this either.

10. Do I put the bucket under the udder when I milk? You can. Some cows do just fine with this. I don't. I milk into a smaller plastic container and dump that into my bucket. I find this easier than being upset because the bucket was kicked and all my "hard work" is spilled on the barn floor. Your cow may not be kicking at you but she will shuffle a bit in the stall. She will kick at flies or at least stomp her feet at them and accidents happen, over your pail goes. The down side to this method of milking into a smaller container is that you have to hold the container with one hand and milk with the other which makes milking take a little longer.

11. It looks like there are flies and dirt in my milk pail; do I have to throw the milk away? Absolutely not! Yes, there will be a little hair, maybe even a little dirt and a fly or two. Pick the flies out when you see them. You can take a towel and throw it over the pail if you are milking into a smaller container to keep them out. When you are done milking take the milk to the house, strain it twice through a good quality cheese cloth. Put it in a jar and put in the fridge to cool. No longer than these unwanted tidbits are in your milk until you get it strained, they won't cause damage to your milk. You can purchase special papers to strain your milk through that separate out the very smallest of things if you want. I have only ever used a good quality cheese cloth and have never had any trouble with our milk. I have drank this milk (and so has my husband and children) for 5 years and we have never had any trouble because of "unclean" milk.

12. Do I have to pasteurize my milk? No. I have never done this in the 5 years that I have milked. Nor did we do this when I was a small child. I simply strain my milk twice and put it in the fridge to cool. If you have qualms about not pasteurizing your milk I would refer you to an excellent book I read which will give you the history and very valuable information about why pasteurizing came about. It is called "The Milk Book" by William Campbell Douglass MD. It is still available and I highly recommend reading it if you are considering pasteurizing your milk. I think you'll rethink this idea after you've read the book.

13. What do I store the milk in? I use gallon glass pickle jars. The milk, I believe, keeps longer in glass than plastic. Any glass jar of size will work. I like a jar with a wide mouth; it is easier to dip off the cream from the top that way.

14. How long will the milk keep? About 5-7 days in the fridge. You can tell when it is getting old, if it lasts that long at your house.

15. What do I do with the cream? Raw milk will separate overnight and you will have a nice layer of wonderful cream on top by morning. I usually just dip it off with a measuring cup and put in another glass jar until I am ready to make butter. I have heard of people using glass tea jugs with the spout and then running the milk out from underneath the cream. I have tried this and I prefer to dip from the top but either method works. You don't have to take the cream off the milk, just shake the jug and pour into a pitcher if you like. The cream will again rise to the top and you can use a spoon to stir it in. My kids are well used to "stirring" their milk before pouring it on cereal! Out of a gallon of dexter milk you can expect 2-3 cups of wonderful cream. I have tried using a cream separator to separate the cream but I don't use one. They are great if you have a lot of milk (5 gallons or more) but there are so many pieces to wash. I don't find it

worth my time to use one to get the cream but you certainly could if you wanted to.

16. How much milk will a dexter give? Well, this varies from cow to cow along with other influences such as feed, weather, water supply etc. I have consistently gotten 2-2 ½ gallons of milk a day from my dexter cows. Usually they will drop off a little as time goes by but I pretty much at the very least will get a gallon a day right before I let her dry up in time for the next calf.

You don't have to dry your cow off. I have always practiced this method because I believe she deserves a little rest before the next calf comes. I do this 6-8 weeks before she is due to calve. To dry your cow off if she isn't cutting back on her own, simply decrease the amount you milk and she will dry up.

17. My milk has a grassy taste, what should I do? Add chocolate syrup to it! When the first green grass comes and you put your cow out to eat, your milk can taste a little grassy. Either wait a few days if you can't stomach the taste or flavor it. There is nothing wrong with the milk it is perfectly safe to drink. We have a weed here in my area of central Nebraska that has small white flower and comes first in spring, if your cow eats this "bitter" weed it will cause the milk to taste bitter. Thankfully this weed comes out and disappears quickly. What your cow eats does affect the taste of her milk. Don't feed her any cabbage plants or items of the cabbage family as this will alter the flavor. I feed my cows pasture grass in summer, brome grass in winter with a little alfalfa mixed in. The only time I have off flavor milk is when first turning her out to green pastures.

I will wrap this up by making a few general comments. When milking provide a calm atmosphere for your cow. Milk cows don't like loud noises and activities going on while milking and will let you know it! Some people sing while they milk or play a radio, it is true the cow finds this soothing.

Your cow will become accustom to certain people milking her. I have had many children come to our farm and want to try to milk. "Jazzi" has always been a gracious teacher to a point. Don't take advantage of your cow's good nature. You'll know when she is ready for the "expert" to get the job done.

Try to make the milking a good experience for you both. I always spray my cow for flies after she is in the milk stall. It helps keep her comfortable and cuts down on her kicking at them. Remember what you use to combat flies will be absorbed through her skin and will get into your milk. I try very hard to stay away from any poisons. I use a mixture of Listerine and Shaklee's Basic H soap and this has been very effective for me. It doesn't last all day but it certainly helps for awhile and it is definitely not toxic! You may wish to have a fan in the barn to circulate air, this is very nice and does help with flies a bit also.

I'm sure I have not covered everything about milking but this will get you a good start. I don't want to discourage anyone from trying to provide safe, healthy food for their family. I do want people to really think before they invest in a milk cow. It is a decision my family will never regret. We have benefitted greatly from this experience but it comes with a price. It does take

a lot of work and patience on everybody's part. You must be able to commit to twice a day milking, every day, no matter the weather. It only takes us 20 min. to milk a gallon of milk from our cow. My youngest daughter started milking at age 10, is now 16 and is as good or better than me at milking.

I have been asked what to do with the extra milk if your family can't drink it all. I have made ice cream, cheese, cottage cheese, and regularly make butter from the cream. I have a recipe for soap made from cows milk but have not had time to try that yet. I give excess to my chickens; it is good protein for them. My cats and dog get there share also. As to whether you can sell it in your state you would have to do the research. Many states do not allow the sale of raw milk for human consumption unless you get it certified. You can however sell it as animal feed without certification.

Finally, we as mothers should enjoy the satisfaction of providing a safe and nutritious food for our family. A family milk cow and the time it takes to keep a milk cow are a small price to pay for milk that is not poisoned with hormones and antibiotics. My grandfather told me once as a little girl that I had become an expert milker. He explained to me that I had a "nice head of foam on the top of my milk". You too will know when you have become an expert milker in a short amount of time.

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