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Weed problem? Mills River couple will rent you a goat herd



Written by

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MILLS RIVER — Ron and Cheryl Searcy's company motto easily could be, "Have goats, will travel."

If you've got the weeds, they've got the goats — about 300 of them. And they're glad to bring them to your property, set up a fence and let those voracious rascals start mowing.

After nearly four years in business, the Searcys have done at least 50 different jobs in several states. Most jobs require 25-30 goats and three-four weeks on site.

They've brought the goats to a large, steep Dominion Power dam site in Virginia, as well as the parks department in Great Neck, N.Y., on Long Island. Ron Searcy tells a humorous story of driving through New York City, pulling a trailer full of goats, then getting lost and pulled over by a cop on Long Island.

"He said, 'Sir, can I ask why you have a load of goats on Long Island?'" Searcy said.

Searcy explained his way out of it — the park trails had become overrun with briars and he'd been hired to let his goats fix the problem. The officer let him go, and the job was a great success — the goats made the briars and weeds vanish.

Simply put, their Boer and Kiko goats, which can get close to 150 pounds, have an insatiable appetite.

On a recent afternoon, about 25 of them were milling around a pasture, nibbling at grass shoots. But when Ron Searcy approached with a feed bucket, the stampede was on.

They gobbled up the grain in less than 10 minutes.

"Thirty minutes from now, you could come back and it'd be the same thing all over again," he said.

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An idea germinates

In the early 1990s, the Searcys, both 55, moved back to the Henderson County family farm where Cheryl grew up. Called "Wells Farm," the land originally was a dairy farm and still comprises 23 acres of mostly pasture land.

Ron Searcy still works full-time as a machinist, and Cheryl Searcy retired after a career as a teacher aide in Henderson County. They have tried about every kind of farming imaginable — tobacco, strawberries, greenhouse tomatoes, beef cattle, row crops and flowers — but they settled on the goats.

"I had two months of retirement before he put me to work," Cheryl Searcy said with a laugh.

At first, it was a meat operation, but after a neighbor witnessed how thoroughly the goats had cleaned up the Searcys' pastures, he offered a proposal.

"He said, 'If you want to put them on my field and fence it in, go right ahead,'" Ron Searcy recalled, adding that the goats went to town. "Afterward, he said, 'You know, you ought to find a way to rent those goats out.'"

The light bulb went off. Ron Searcy decided to launch the business with six goats at the 2007 Southeastern Agriculture Expo, and he asked his daughter, Sara Thompson, who does marketing work, for some help.

"She looked at me and said, 'You're nuts! Nobody is going to pay you to rent a goat,'" Ron Searcy said, laughing. "But the phone has been ringing off the hook every since."

Thompson now helps out regularly with marketing Wells Farm, and her brother, attorney Sam Searcy, helps out with legal and business matters.

The cost

For a job to make sense financially for the landowner and the Searcys, it usually needs to involve 5-10 acres, or more. The average price is about \$500 an acre, with 10 goats to the acre working three or four weeks. Searcy comes and sets up metal fence posts, strings five strands of wire and hooks them up to a solar charger so the wire delivers a shock to the goats if they get too close.

Searcy says most landowners come out ahead, plus they're not using herbicides that can leach into water supplies, or

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wallowing through weed-covered, rocky terrain.

"It's cheaper, and it's an environmentally friendly concept," Ron Searcy said.

Matt Buchanan, director of the WNC Agricultural Center in Fletcher, said they have rented the Searcys' goats three years running to clear an area near a retention pond.

"You cannot put men in there with weed whackers — it's steep and a lot of the stuff you're trying to cut has so many briars and blackberries all around it," Buchanan said. "But the goats, they just go in and take care of it. And what they don't eat, they trample down."

Ron Searcy says the goats won't tear land up, though, like heavier livestock such as cattle or horses. Their goats average 120-140 pounds as adults.

They're nimble, docile animals with tremendous traction. They'll attack briar-laden, steep hillsides that people don't want to touch, and they'll absolute wipe out one of the South's peskiest weeds: kudzu.

"They don't back down from anything. The thicker the brush, the better," Ron Searcy said.

Well, most times.

"They draw the line at any of the rhododendron family, and that includes mountain laurel," Ron Searcy said. "And cat

tails — they won't eat those."

The Searcys have gotten two grants totaling \$11,000 from the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund, which helps tobacco farmers branch out into alternatives. They'll use the most recent grant to convert an old dairy barn into a treatment area for the goat herd.

Goats draw a crowd

Wherever the Searcys take their herds, crowds soon appear. People just love watching the goats work.

Searcy tells a story about a job in Polk County near a grocery store. Locals would go in and buy snacks, then head across the street to have a picnic and watch the goats chow down.

"I don't care where we go, these guys become the focus of attention," Searcy said, gesturing at the herd.

That will likely be the case at the next big

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job. In the coming weeks, the goats will get to work behind Biltmore Square Mall, gobbling up acres of weeds and brush between the mall and the interstate.

John Vining, head of the Polk County office of the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service, said farmers in other states and other parts of the country, particularly out west, routinely rent out goat herds. But the business model hasn't caught on yet in the mountains.

It makes tremendous sense, though, because the goat herd eliminates the need for herbicides and makes life easier for landowners who can't or don't want to deal with treacherous hillsides, rock-laden fields that have gone to seed or poisonous snakes. The goats also leave behind a fair amount of fertilizer that helps desired plants gain a foothold.

"I wish more people would consider getting into it," Vining said, adding that Searcy really has established a niche for himself. "He's got the technique down, with the fencing and the solar charger."

Not getting rich

It's not all sitting back and collecting the cash, though. Each animal requires annual vaccinations, as well as hay and feed through the winter. Also, their hooves must be trimmed two or three times a year.

"That's a lot of feet," Ron Searcy said with a laugh.

Figure in hundreds of metal posts and miles of fence wire, a trailer, truck and fuel, and it's not a cheap operation.

"All you need is one big jailbreak, and you're in real trouble," Ron Searcy said, noting that their farm is insured.

"If you were going to get into a business like this, you'd want to have \$100,000 or so to start, just for the business expenses," Cheryl Searcy said. Besides their 23 acres, the couple leases another 55 acres or so for the goats to graze on.

The couple also send one of their eight dogs — great Pyrenees or a mix of Pyrenees and Kangals, a breed native to Turkey — on every job for herd protection. At 140 pounds or more and with heads the size of a soccer ball, the dogs are effective.

They're fiercely protective against coyotes and other problem animals.

"We've lost more goats to dogs than anything else," Cheryl Searcy explained.

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The Searcys stop by the job sites once a week or so to check on the animals' health and put out some feed to ensure a balanced diet.

If you're worried that this is somehow unkind to the goats, Ron Searcy says they're actually much healthier eating their way through the brush, rather than stuck in a pasture where their food supply is more limited and their droppings sometimes pose a health hazard.

"They're much healthier in the wild," Ron Searcy said, standing at the edge of a pasture. "This right here is not their natural habitat."

And those days of selling the goats for meat are over.

"When they get too old to work, we just keep them right here," Ron Searcy said with a smile.

About Wells Farm

Established in 1938, Wells Farm was once a dairy but now has morphed into a rent-a-goat-herd operation. The goats are naturals when it comes to clearing areas containing invasive vegetation, and owners Ron and Cheryl Searcy say controlled herd grazing provides an ecologically sustainable method of land management. Their herds have completed more than 50 jobs, including large projects at a power company dam in Virginia and for the parks department in Great Neck, N.Y. For more information, call 877-5109, or visit their website: www.wellsfarmgoats.com. Videos of the herd at work are on the website.

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