

Why use sheep to clear your ivy, privet, wisteria, kudzu, poison ivy, etc?

- Sheep are a completely organic solution with no negative impacts on soil, water or pollinators unlike chemical sprays or heavy machinery. Getting rid of your ivy, privet, cherry laurel, elaeagnus, wisteria, kudzu, and other invasive plants eliminates mosquitoes and threats to trees, not to mention the best habitat for rats and snakes, it returns the biomass from those plants to the soil without re-seeding because sheep guts are so hot they burn up the seeds, and it returns the nutrients to the soil as a form of slow release fertilizer (manure pellets).
- Sheep do not cause erosion like big machines but still provide access to your property.
- Sheep do a really good job at a remarkably reasonable price point.
- It is a chance to do something the SLOW way and we need more of that.

Why use sheep instead of goats?

Well, first of all, sheep are good partners. They work hard. They eat almost twenty hours out of each day. And pound-for-pound sheep eat almost twice as much as a goat each day. They are not aggressive and they are good at protecting each other in herds. Plus, they are much less likely to challenge a fence and try to get out. That is nice for everyone. And what comes out the other end is slow-release fertilizer pellets with low odor and almost no active seeds.

Sheep also pull when they eat. That's because their mouths are different than the mouths of goats. It sounds strange, but it is true. Look it up. Sheep have a different jaw and mouth mechanics than goats. That is why cowboys do not like sheep to this day - when they overgraze something, they really overgraze it, pulling up roots and all if you don't get them out of an area. Sheep pull and goats nibble. Pulling is better when you want to get rid of a noxious plant. They cannot eat the woody stem, of course, but they do much better than goats at getting all the way down to the woody stem. Plus, they do not eat the bark off trees and they do not like azaleas and a few other native plants that are common here in Atlanta. Their selectiveness is perfect for the average Atlanta backyard.

Third, sheep eat about 130 more local species than goats. They do not have the reputation that goats have, but that is probably because they do not chew on other things that goats might chew on. They focus on greens and greens only.

What happens when the sheep run out of greens to eat?

Our main job is taking care of the sheep. That means we make sure they have hay and grains and minerals and grooming and veterinary care. Every day. It might look like they have nothing to eat, but they will continue grazing vines and even some roots if they only have other fodder for nutrition. That is *overgrazing* and that is what is needed to do the job right with invasives. There is some risk to the animals if the bacteria count gets high. Vet checks come into play every time we get to the overgrazing phase. You will probably notice younger and more vulnerable animals switched out at that point. Or you might not. But we will. That is what we do. We take care of the sheep and make sure their diet is right and their health is good.

Can we give the sheep treats?

No. Really. We have lost more sheep to people who feed them treats than to predators and disease combined.

Do the sheep ever get sick - or die?

Yes, and yes. In spite of the best veterinary care money can buy, there are all sorts of bacteria and infections and predators that threaten our animals - just like livestock on any farm. Snakes can be a problem. Coyotes have taken several sheep this year. Dogs off of leashes are usually the biggest threat. A huge problem is people feeding the sheep food that they are not used to eating - even carrots and other veggies or bread - which causes the sheep to bloat and can kill them quickly. Some of our sheep do get sick even though we deworm much more heavily than most operations in Georgia and we vaccinate against six major diseases, far more than most Georgia sheep operations. We give our animals free access to vital minerals at all times. Their feet and bodies are checked every two weeks even if they are not limping or showing any signs of illness. As a result, some of our sheep are fifteen years old and a bit frail. That is about ten years longer than most females on commercial operations and thirteen or fourteen years longer than males. We do not sell at market and we only cull with our vet unless there is an emergency. So we think our sheep have it pretty good and we mean to keep it that way by constantly taking more classes and learning better ways to take care of the flock.

What can you tell us about the dogs?

We have several dogs. We have Great Pyrenees, Akbash, and Anatolian shepherds. They are all trained as livestock guardian dogs. They are raised with the sheep and they identify with the sheep and have a strong protector instinct. They are all nocturnal, they stay awake at night to protect and sleep during the day. Most of them are averse to human contact and we prefer they stay that way. The dogs generally avoid conflict with predators, preferring to alert to them by barking and pacing back and forth, but from time to time the dogs decide coexistence is not possible. It depends on the dog and on the threat at hand. We place them in pairs or singles depending on our assessment of the threat and likely human and pet interactions they will encounter.

The dogs have shelters and you will probably never see them used. But they have them.

The dogs are fed every single day and they are taken to the groomer and the vet after every single job and in between as necessary.

The best way to respond to livestock guardian dogs is to not approach. Never give them treats or pets. Never approach with another animal. Just let them do their job.