

FREE

# GOING GREEN

The Valley guide to an eco-friendly lifestyle

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Vol. 5, No. 1

## Bring on the goats



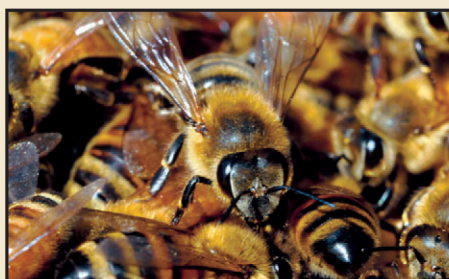
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in green brush clearing*

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On the cover: Hungry goats spill out of the back of a pickup, ready to clear brush without using chemical pesticides or power tools. Photo/Jessica Schultz. See story this page.

## COVER STORY



Photo/Jessica Schultz, Hitchcock Center  
Two goats from the Goat Girls flock clear poison ivy from the grounds at Amherst's Hitchcock Center for the Environment.

# Have goats, will travel

## Amherst business offers the ultimate in green brush clearing

By MAUREEN TURNER  
Special to Going Green

AMHERST — Over the years, the staff at Amherst's Hitchcock Center for the Environment has tried all sorts of ways to manage the poison ivy that grows along its trails and around its property.

"As an environmental center, we didn't want to use any chemicals," explained Colleen Kelley, Hitchcock's education director. So they tried to "smother" it by covering it with cardboard and lime, but that didn't work. A volunteer offered to pull it out by hand, but that came with its own challenges, including how to dispose of the plants, which Hitchcock didn't want to send to the landfill.

Then Kelley heard of a solution that sounded ideal: the Goat Girls. The business, based in Amherst, offers clients the ultimate in green brush-clearing, eschewing both chemical pesticides and tools that depend on fossil fuel in favor of a much simpler solution: a pack of hungry — not to mention adorable — goats.

Goat Girls owner Hope Crolius founded the business in 2010. It began as an offshoot of her other business, Artemis Garden Consultants, which



Photo/Jessica Schultz, Hitchcock Center  
Hope Crolius, owner of the Goat Girls, herds her goats as they clear brush at the Hitchcock Center in Amherst, Oct. 2013.

also has a green focus, using only hand tools and avoiding combustion engines in its work. When a client asked her for advice on clearing an overgrown field, she initially recommended bringing in sheep. But after some research, she learned that goats would be better for the job; while sheep graze low to the ground, goats are drawn to plants that are higher off the ground. "Once it's been trampled on, they won't touch it," she explained.

Three years after starting the  
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## ■ Goat Girls

Continued from previous page  
business, Crolius said, she and her 14 goats have trouble keeping up with the demand for their services. Clients come to Goat Girls with a range of needs: some want to clear land to start a garden or prepare for a building project. Some are clearing trails for walking or horseback riding. Others want to remove vegetation to control mosquitoes or reduce fire risks, or to get rid of invasive plants like bittersweet or multiflora rose, or poison ivy or sumac (which goats can eat with no ill effect). In addition to offering a chemical-free solution, the goats provide a bonus for the soil: organic fertilizer, fresh from the source.

The Hitchcock Center wanted to clear poison ivy from a patch of land along one of its trails, right next to its “popcorn shelter,” a wooden structure that’s a popular rest-and-snack stop for visitors, including kids who come for field trips and preschool and homeschool programs. With its Halloween-themed “Enchanted Forest” program, which sees families trooping along the trails for evening tours, on the horizon, Hitchcock was eager to get its poison-ivy problem

Continued on next page



While sheep graze low to the ground, goats are drawn to plants that are higher off the ground, making them ideal for brush-clearing duties.

Photo/Jessica Schultz, Hitchcock Center



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## Goat Girls: Eco-friendly land clearers

Continued from previous page

under control, but in a way that was in keeping with its commitment to protecting the environment.

On a recent morning, the Goat Girls arrived at the Hitchcock Center in a truck painted in the company's trademark hot pink. In the back stood the goats, who had skipped breakfast so they'd be ready to tackle that morning's job.

But first, a portable nylon fence had to be set up to contain the goats in the area that needed to be cleared — the most labor intensive part of the job, Crolius noted. "Once the goats are out, it's Easy Street." The fence is electrified, although it wouldn't be turned on that day, since a goat herder planned to stay with the animals the entire time. While some clients hire the Goat Girls for several weeks' work, this was a relatively small job that would take just a few hours.

Finally, with the fence in place, the goats — a mix of male and female, sporting pink and blue bandanas around their necks — were unloaded from the truck and guided down the path to the area they needed to clear. Once there, they fanned out and tucked in, calmly but steadily grazing.

One goat began scraping his horns determinedly against a sapling; he was scraping off the bark to reach the cambium layer, just under the bark, which is rich with nutrients, Crolius explained. As he worked away, he pushed down the tree with his front legs. "He does a belly flop to flatten it for everyone else," she said.

Sometimes, Crolius said, the Goat Girls' human workers will finish clearing brush or foliage the goats leave behind. Goats don't root out plants the way, say, pigs do; in fact, Crolius is considering partnering with a pig farmer, whose animals would complement the work her goats do. Her future plans also include offering a regular lawn-care service which would bring the goats to a client's property for several visits, to keep unwanted plants under control long-term. The best time to do that kind of work, she said, is in early spring, when the goats can remove plants just as they're beginning to grow.



Photo/Jessica Schultz, Hitchcock Center  
**John Ross, goat herder for the Goat Girls, and daughter Sadie, put up fencing to contain the goats while they graze.**

Then, on return visits, they can eliminate regrowth before it becomes established.

Fall is not an ideal time for the kind of job the Goat Girls did at Hitchcock. While the animals

removed the poison ivy that was encroaching on the paths and the snack shelter, it's a temporary fix, and the plant will grow back in the spring. Still, Kelley said, "they did really well," clearing the land for the Enchanted Forest and making the popcorn shelter more accessible. And there was even an added educational bonus: when the preschool class Kelley leads came out for a hike, the kids had a front-row

view of the goats in action as both groups ate their morning snacks.

To contact the Goat Girls: [www.thegoatgirls.com](http://www.thegoatgirls.com) or call 413-461-6832.

**MAUREEN TURNER** is a Valley-based journalist who lives with her family in Florence. She has a master's degree in journalism from UNC-Chapel Hill.



■ Future plans include offering a regular lawn-care service which would bring the goats to a client's property for several visits, to keep unwanted plants under control long-term.

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# ROUTE 9

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