

Hand Milking a Cow: Steps from Start to Finish

Routine Milking Time

I remember when we first got our dairy cow. I quickly realized how important routine was in the process. A good routine can make many tasks seem like little work. I am sure you will develop your own unique routine. Mine may be great for you and it might not but I will share mine with you and allow you to make that decision.

The important thing is not to have my routine specifically but to have a routine that fits you and your unique homestead. I would love to know what works for you so please leave a comment we can all learn something from each other. The topic I want to cover is a routine milking time, or your milking schedule.

First Thing You Need

If you are a new milk cow owner or about to be a milk cow owner one of the first things you will need to do is establish the time of day you are going to milk your cow.

Your cow may not wear a watch or have a clock in the barn but I promise you she knows when its time to milk. Internally she knows what time it is and will be expecting you on time. Cows love routine and hate change but they do adjust over time. If you alter the set time suddenly you will likely have an agitated cow which is not so great for hand milking.

Our cow, Treasure, lets us know when she is not happy with us. We have learned her signals of being pleased or displeased. She may puff and snort at us, poop or pee in the station, or smack us with her tail, but she will get her point across.

Treasure came from a small dairy farm; she was one of eight cows in the herd, I think she was number 7 in the milking order. Both Treasure and us had a lot of adjusting to do once she came to our farm. She missed her herd and had probably never been without other cows. At first she was pretty mad at us but we kept talking to her and visiting her until she began to love us. My daughter spent a lot of time those first couple of days sitting with her reading to her, talking with her, and spending quality time with her. Treasure loves to spend time with us and would be overjoyed if we decided to come spend the entire day in the pasture with her. She loves to be talked to, rubbed, brushed, or just near us. I guess we are her new herd. I will be honest adapting to having a milk cow was one of the hardest things we have done so far on our farm. There were even moments when I thought it may be best if we sold her. Only my cow knows

this but I did have a few breakdowns in the barn and cried. Treasure is my favorite homestead animal.

When we got Treasure she was already in milk and was used to being milked about 8:30 each morning. We have changed this time a few times over the past couple of years due to work schedules and other reasons. I'll explain how to change the time a little further down. It is important to choose a time that you can live with and will enjoy. Don't feel obligated to keep a time for milking that just doesn't work for you and your family. I have a friend who used to have a milk cow and for some reason she thought she had to milk the cow at 5 O'clock each morning. Her son and husband were enlisted to help her with the daily task and they hated the schedule and this resulted in neither of them enjoying the experience even though they loved the raw milk. My friend did not know she could change the time she milked the cow and someone had told her it had to be done very early in the morning, so they contended with this terrible schedule the entire time they owned the cow. You want this to be a good experience and a milking time that fits your schedule is much better than a milking time you have to try to fit into. You can literally milk your cow any time of day you choose. Let's say you work a night shift, you can milk your cow at 2pm if you like or whatever time works for you. I don't think night time when they are normally sleeping would be good but if that were your only option and your cow was agreeable I'm sure a routine could be developed.

Changing the schedule

You can change the time of day you milk if your schedule changes. If you have a regular milk time and want to change it you can, just do it gradually. Let's say for example your cow is used to being milked at 7 o'clock each morning and you want to change the time to 8 o'clock. Go out 30 minutes later one morning and maybe even the next morning. On the third morning go out at 8 o'clock. You can move the time up or down using this method. Go out to milk 30 minutes earlier or later than normal and keep bumping the time up or down until you reach the desired time after a few days or however long it takes. Once a routine time is set your cow will know when to expect you and will be happy to see you.

Reasons for a routine milk time

There is another reason to have a routine milking time, it will help prevent mastitis. If you have ever breastfeed your baby then you know that your body knew when it was feeding time and your breast would fill with milk, this is called letting down or the letdown of the milk. It is similar for the cow, once a routine time is established she will begin to let her milk down around that time each day. If her milk comes down and you don't milk it puts the cow at risk for mastitis because the orifice of the teat opens up which can allow for bacteria to enter the teat. If bacteria gets inside the teat it will cause infection and inflammation. Mastitis is defined as an inflammation in the udder and is sometimes caused by bacteria. Mastitis can be mild or severe, but that is a topic for another read, the key point here is a routine milking time will help prevent mastitis.

A routine milking time will also help your cow to consistently give the same amount of milk. Just like a breastfeeding mother produces more milk as the baby nurses more and less milk as the baby nurses less a cow will adjust her milk production. Milking earlier than usual will result in less milk most of the time. This is because the cow has not let her milk down yet. Milking later than usual can sometimes result in less milk as well since some may have leaked out before you got around to milking since she let her milk down and wasn't milked at the normal time.

A homestead with a milk cow will be a happy homestead with a happy cow if you have a routine milk time that you and your cow both enjoy. The routine time will help ensure a consistent amount of milk each day, lower the chances of mastitis, and allow you to schedule other activities around your milking.

Prepping the Kitchen

Preparing in the kitchen before you head out to the barn will help get the milking off to a good start. It will also make finishing up easier.

To be honest the morning prep begins the night before. By this I mean having clean equipment ready the day before. A good way to get off to a bad start is to realize your milking equipment is dirty when its time to go milk. No one wants to do all that work right before they go out to milk.

If your cow normally gives 2 gallons of milk you will want to have clean jars to hold that much milk with lids ready before you go out to the barn.

Here is a list of things I prepare before going out to milk.

- 4 clean half gallon mason jars
- 4 clean lids for the jars
- A metal mesh strainer
- A funnel (I have a strainer and a funnel that fit together perfectly)
- A reusable cheesecloth filter (I place this between the strainer and the funnel)
- A marker to label the date on the lids
- A clean milk bucket covered with cheesecloth secured with rubber band

I place the clean jars on the table along with the rest of the preps. To strain our milk I use a stainless steel mesh strainer, a cheesecloth filter, and a funnel.

I prepare a jar of water with about a cup of white vinegar and about 15 drops of peppermint essential oil that we use to wash the cows bag and teats before milking.

I prepare the milk bucket by placing a clean cheesecloth over the top and securing it with a rubber band and place the lid on the bucket.

We keep a supply of "cow rags" to wash the cow in the barn in a plastic container.

Out to the barn

Now that your kitchen is prepped you are ready to head out to the barn. Be sure to take with you your already prepared milk bucket, your wash water, and clean cloths.

Our cow is usually waiting at the door with milk already beginning to leak from her teats. She is really not the most patient cow. If we let her into the barn before we have everything ready she will get in the way. Cows love routine. It is best to make her wait outside until everything is ready so she isn't trying to figure out what we are going to do next. Even though it is cute the way she is so curious about every move we make she can get in the way.

Once you get to the barn you will want to get everything ready before you let in the cow.

If you feed your cow grain or hay put it in the stanchion feed trough. Take a quick look around. Make sure the stanchion is clean of debris or anything that might make milking unpleasant. Open the head gate and you are ready to let in the cow.

Prep the cow

Going into the stanchion will be automatic for your cow unless this is her first time. If you are training your cow to go into the stanchion the feed in the trough will certainly be a motivator. It may take some time and patience but it will be a natural routine once you have done it a few times.

It is a good idea to give your cow a light brushing once she is in the head gate. Be sure to brush around the hind parts where you will be sitting. This will help decrease the amount of dirt that might fall into the milk bucket.

After brushing it's time to wash her bag and teats. We have a stainless steel bowl we use to pour our wash water into that we keep in the barn. Use a clean cloth and the wash water to wash her bag and each teat. The washing will keep the milk clean as well as stimulate the cow to let down her milk.

Time to strip

After the cow is all cleaned up it's time to strip.

First you will want to wash your hands. We use the extra wash water we used to wash the cow.

The teats naturally form a seal in the orifice to keep out bacterium. Stripping is a way to get this out and clean the teat. This ensures that all the milk that goes into the bucket is as clean as possible.

During stripping is a good time to check for any signs of mastitis. We keep a small stainless steel strip cup in the barn that we strip into. You can buy specially designed strip cups that are made of stainless steel but they are not necessary. We strip by squirting the first few squirts of milk into the strip cup. If there are any lumps or clots or stringy looking milk that is likely mastitis. We will discuss mastitis in another article.

Now it's time for the best part, the milking.

Position your milk bucket under the cow and get in a comfortable position on your milking stool.

I usually lean over into my cow's side so that she can feel that I am there. I'm told you are supposed to milk from the right side of the cow. We milk our cow for both sides. It really depends on the cow and how she is trained or what she will accept.

There are various milking techniques but it is fairly simple. You will find one that you like or you may find a couple. The important thing is to use a technique you are comfortable with.

Milking should be an enjoyable time. Milking is quality time for you and your cow. We talk and sing to our cow while we milk and she loves it.

Be sure to milk each teat completely out. Milking completely out is important to preventing mastitis.

After milking

Once you have all the milk out it's time for the post milking steps.

In cold weather each teat needs to be coated with udder balm and dipped in an iodine dip. In warm weather the balm can be optional. After rubbing each teat with balm, dip them in the iodine solution. The iodine dip keeps out any bacterium while the teat forms the protective seal.

Thank the cow for the milk and let her know how much you like her and let her back out to the pasture.

Back to the Kitchen

After coming back in with the bucket of fresh milk everything is ready. All that needs to be done is pour the milk through the strainer from the bucket to the jars. Place the lid on the jar. Write the date on the top of the lid and place the full jars in the fridge to chill.

Now it's time to prep for the next day by washing the equipment and putting it out of the way to stay clean for the next morning.

We use cheesecloth in our strainer and to cover our milk bucket. I rinse them out with warm water and place them in a jar of hydrogen peroxide. I have enough cloths to last about a week. When I am down to my last cloth I rinse them and place them in a pot of boiling water for about 10 minutes. Once they cool I squeeze out the water and place them in a plastic container with a lid and keep them in the refrigerator. The reason I keep them stored this way is to keep them as clean and germ free as possible. If I were to air dry them dirt and dust may get on them so I just keep them wet and keep them in the refrigerator.

Summary of Steps:

Set a routine milking time

Gather your supplies

- 4 clean lids for the jars
- 4 clean half gallon mason jars
- A metal mesh strainer
- A funnel (I have a strainer and a funnel that fit together perfectly)
- A reusable cheesecloth filter (I place this between the strainer and the funnel)
- A marker to label the date on the lids
- A clean milk bucket covered with cheesecloth secured with rubber band

Prep the cow

Strip

Milk

Post milking cow care

Strain the milk

Enjoy your fresh milk

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