

When you want to keep a dairy cow

Many smallholder farmers tend to go into dairy cow keeping by blind trust.

They are told about the economic benefits of owning a dairy cow and they go for one without taking sufficient time to inquire about the suitability and qualities of the cow they want to keep.

In some cases they trust NGOs or some anti-poverty programmes to deliver the cows to them either as donations or as loans in which case they are expected to pay for the animal with earnings from the milk sold or to give back the first calf produced to the organisation as a form of payment.

First and foremost the farmer should seek advice from the area agricultural officer about the external qualities of a good dairy cow often known as body conformation characteristics.

Does it have a large udder and well developed teats? Is its stomach large enough to accommodate a large amount of food? Does it have strong legs to support its body weight?

Is it a peaceful animal? You do not want a cow that will keep battling the walls of its enclosure or fighting everyone.

Try to inquire about the milk yield performance of its parents, sisters, and cousins. How prone are they to disease? Like humans, animals too have inherited genetic characteristics, which is why it is important to have an idea where you get your dairy cow from.

Try and find out about its calving index. A dairy cow which produces a calf every year should be the most ideal. Some animals are born on well-maintained farms which ensure high milk yields. If you purchase a cow from such a farm and you fail to give it the amount of care it had, you might be disappointed by its poor performance.

The farmer should have sufficient fodder and water for the cow all the time. If it is going to be kept in an enclosure which is known as zero-grazing it should be constructed in such a way that the farmer can trap its urine and collect its droppings for use as manure.

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