

Care Of Older Cattle



Texas Longhorn cattle are known for their longevity, living into their mid to late teens. There are documented accounts of cattle living into their twenties with some making it into their thirties. While living that long is a major accomplishment for a bovine some of these animals even continue to produce quality offspring along the way. In the case of most of these cattle they do this with little to no extra help. It's my opinion that we are seeing a decrease in the longevity in our breed, but that is a whole other topic for another day.

In this brief article, we are going to talk about the little extra care that a breeder can provide for the senior cows in the herd. Sometimes new breeders find it more affordable to purchase older proven cattle to hopefully build their herd. This is not always an affordable way to go but rather a costly way when you are not prepared to provide the extra care they may need. I am not saying "don't buy older cattle" but rather educate yourself and be prepared to go the extra mile for them. The cow pictured above is one of those older cows (18+yrs) that holds up well and doesn't look or show her age. She has maintained her body condition while simply running on good pasture. She calves regularly and breeds back quickly. As a matter of fact she calved not long after this photo was taken and bred back 25 days after calving. So she is one of those easy keeping older cows. Not all older cows are this easy to care for but they can be worth the effort.

There are a few simple things that I feel a breeder can do to help these older cows out in hopes of getting a few more calves on the ground from them.

- ❖ First off evaluate the condition of your older cattle in the spring and fall or more often.
 - Check the condition of teeth.
 - Body condition (should be checked regularly)

After checking their teeth and body condition you can better decide on the best source of nutrition. If their teeth are worn-down, missing or broken then you will probably need to start them on a supplemental feeding program. Make sure the feed and hay that you are providing them with is easy for them to chew. I.E. a textured feed. Feeds such as cubes, large stemmed hay or tall tough pasture grass would not be a suitable feed for cattle with poor teeth. The feed should have a protein level of 12% to 14% and in my opinion, it is best that the protein be from a natural source, not from urea. Cattle with bad teeth can do poorly and lose body condition on a pasture full of grass if the grass is tall and tough. They will fare much better on a pasture in the spring time or that has been recently mowed, the grass is tender making it easy for them to graze with what teeth they have left.

- Feed loose Minerals and Vitamins free choice.

All cattle should have free choice access to a good quality loose mineral with vitamins, in my opinion. Mineral blocks are not sufficient. Older animals can benefit even more from a good mineral program. I also like using a shot of MultiMin 90(R) to help them maintain a balance of minerals/vitamins. A lot of minerals and vitamins work in concert with each other, so increasing one without its counterpart doesn't offer as much benefit to the treated animal.

- ❖ Next check joints for swelling and signs of arthritis. Do they move around freely or do they have stiffness when walking or getting up from laying down?

By checking for any signs of arthritis you will be able to determine if the animal is able to continue to forage in larger or rougher pastures. If there is an indication of the onset of arthritis then you might need to set up a "granny pasture" to house your older cattle. This pasture should be small and one that would be easier for them to travel around. This will also make it easier for the cattle to receive any additional supplemental feeding that they may require without having to fight other stronger cattle for the feed. They will also need to have access to some kind of shelter or windbreak, manmade or created by mother nature depending on the area that you live.

- ❖ Have their reproductive status checked.

If they are still breeding then you need to plan for the calves to arrive when the pastures and weather are good. It is real hard on older cows to nurse a calf in the late fall or winter even when receiving supplemental feeding. They are working to maintain their body condition, maintain their body temperature in the cold weather as well as produce milk for a nursing calf. All this can put a real strain on older cattle which can cause them to go down. So keep that in mind as you try to get that "one more" calf out of that special old cow.



Rest In Peace Nike @ 19yrs

- ❖ For a lot of folks the hardest part of owning older cattle is knowing when to let them go. When their quality of life is no longer good it may be time. It's a hard decision to make but one that has to be made if you choose to keep older cattle around rather than selling them before they hit those teen years. The cow pictured above had a good life until arthritis in her knees and hips made getting up and down almost impossible. We made the tough call to put her down before she was completely down, immobile and suffering. These are just a few tips to try and help breeders maintain and get the most out of older cattle.