

## Little Cows for Small Farms and Ranches

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As printed in the November 2007 issue of Rare Breeds Journal

Throughout this nation the miniature cattle industry is growing at a rate of around 30% a year. The number one reason behind this increase is the shrinking of tracts of land. Historically, the first cattle in the United States were small in size, only to be bred larger during the 1940's and 1950's. In the early days of the American cattle industry, huge operations such as the King Ranch of Texas had all the land they wanted and the demand for beef was growing. The soldiers returning from World War II wanted steaks. This increased the demand for meat, brought about the development of much larger animals that produced bigger yields of beef per carcass.



It seems everywhere we drive outside the city limits we see urban sprawl. Because of our growing population, the spreading out of city residents and services to the countryside is turning good farm and ranch land into strip malls and housing projects. Would-be farmers and ranchers are moving out of the cities on to small five- to 10-acre ranchettes.

These diminished acreages have led to the need for a smaller, more productive breed of cattle. Miniature Zebu is the breed to meet this need. On five acres, a rancher can raise (2) two large, full-size beef cattle. But five acres can accommodate up to (10) ten Miniature Zebu. Sales of Miniature Zebu are on the rise. Zebu cattle eat less and, therefore, cost less to feed; and they are less destructive to pasture. Their diminutive size makes them easier to handle.

Miniature Zebu differ from other small cattle in that they are a natural breed. They are not just bred to be tinier and tinier each generation or aren't just the results of a breeding-gone-bad. This breed is actually one of the oldest known cattle breeds, dating back to 6000 BC. They are believed to have originated in Southern India or Sri Lanka, where they are referred to as Nadudana cattle, or "small cattle" in Hindu. Miniature Zebu is of the "*Bos primigenius indicus*" of the Bovine family, whereas their ancestors, the larger breed of Brahman cattle, are "*Bos indicus*". A few of these were imported in the 1920's for zoological gardens in this country, and from there the breed has flourished in the United States.

Aside from its size, one of the distinguishing characteristics is a well-developed hump, especially on the mature bull. They have the Brahman look except a miniature zebu's ears are erect rather than pendulous. Both bulls and cows have horns of moderate size. In comparison to conventional breeds of

cattle, Miniature Zebu cattle are slow to mature. It appears that the smaller the animals, the older they are when they first breed. It is normal for a heifer to give birth to her first calf at around 30 to 36 months of age. This is one of the reasons that they are relatively rare in the United States.

Miniature Zebu are a hearty, disease resistant breed of cattle. This is a tropical breed that loves hot weather and will lie in full sun on the hottest days of the year. On windy or cold days they prefer to spend their time inside a shelter. As long as you furnish them with proper housing in the winter months, they will do fine.

Miniature cattle are much easier on the land, pasture, fencing and equipment and are considerably safer for children to be around. They are also easier and safer to confine for veterinarian care. Expensive fencing and heavy-duty equipment is not needed. Generally, these animals are not a primary food-producing breed, which means they are not generally used for production of beef. However, one of the advantages to raising Miniature Zebu cattle, if meat is your goal, is that you are looking at a 600-pound animal that after butchering will yield about 60%. That's 350 to 400 pounds of lean beef--just the right amount to fill the family freezer.

A Miniature Zebu breeder has up to six different markets for their newborn calves: pets, beef, breeding animals, mini milkers, junior rodeo stock and show cattle. About 70% of the Miniature Zebu sold today are being sold as pets. Many of the professional couples that are moving out of the cities and occupying those three- to five-acre mini ranchettes are looking for four-legged lawn mowers. You do not own Miniature Zebras, they own you. Kay Byerly of Dry Creek Farm in Terrell, Texas put it the best I have ever heard, "Oh, my goodness, I feel sorry for anyone who does not own Zebu...they are such a joy!"

Miniature Zebu cattle can make excellent milking cows. The normal Jersey or Holstein milk cow can produce up to five gallons of milk per day, more than the average family can use. Your mini-milker, a Zebu, will produce a gallon of milk that is very high in butterfat; and the quality of milk cannot be beat.

Several rodeo outfitters are now carrying a string of junior rodeo bulls and feel that the only true rodeo bulls are the Brahman like Miniature Zebu. They feel that the six- to 12-year-old-rodeo enthusiasts prefer full-grown Miniature Zebu bulls to calves from full-size cattle. Aside from the rodeo uses, Miniature Zebu cattle are also the ideal show cattle for the younger 4H and FAA participants. They are small in size and easy to handle. Miniature Zebras are an excellent exhibition breed of cattle. They cohabit well with other animals because they don't eat as much as the large breeds and are easier to handle and care for.

Some of the other characteristics promoted by breeders are that this breed has a long life span, living 20-plus years with good care. They are intelligent, resistant to flies due to their very active sub-dermal

(under the skin) twitching muscles. They have functional sweat glands that aid in cooling, which makes them more heat tolerant.

In the early 1990's a group of enthusiasts met to establish the International Miniature Zebu Association whose registry would gather and maintain the studbook of this breed. Under the registration guidelines to be classified as miniature, the mature height cannot exceed 42 inches, but most Zebu breeders strive to raise cattle in the 34" to 38" range. Mature cows will weigh 300 to 400 pounds with the bulls ranging from 400 to 600 pounds. Although gray is the most common, colors range from black, red, spotted or steel gray to almost pure white. In mature bulls, the neck shoulders and hump may be nearly black.

If you have never seen a newborn Miniature Zebu calf, you don't know what you are missing. They are so extremely petite, almost fawn-like. Newborn calves are 16 to 18 inches tall and weigh 18 to 22 pounds. The bottom line is we raise Miniature Zebu cattle because we love them, not just to make a profit. Purchase animals that you like and want to have, not for the purpose of just making money.

If you want to know more about Miniature Zebu cattle or to find a Zebu breeder near you, contact: International Miniature Zebu Association at (407) 717-0084, or visit [www.IMZA.name](http://www.IMZA.name).