



BREEDING, FEEDING AND HOUSING OF SHEEP

Breeding

What is the Best Time to Start a Flock? It is in the fall, after the lambs are weaned that most sheep change hands and that will prove the best season at which to start a flock. Ewes are most easily secured at that time and often they can be kept on stubble fields or aftermaths before and during the breeding season.

What is the Best Size of Flocks? A small flock of 10 to 15 ewes may be satisfactory for a beginner. However, this is not an economical unit, and it should be increased as the flock owner gains experience. In the East, 40 to 50 ewes are about the most that the average farm can carry. In the mixed-farming districts of the West, a flock of 50 to 100 ewes is considered to be a practical and profitable unit. Only under special circumstances can much larger flocks be maintained to advantage.

What is One to Consider in Choosing a Breed? The matter of breed is one of the first problems. In the selection consideration should be given to the kind of pasture and feeds available, the general system of farming along with the characteristics of the breeds. In the East any of the medium wool breeds such as Oxford, Hampshire, Shropshire, Suffolk, Southdown, Cheviot, or long wool breeds such as Leicester, Lincoln and Cotswold will do, remembering that the heavier breeds would thrive better on low fertile lands while the rocky and hilly pasture are the natural habitat of the Cheviot. In the West, fine wool sheep such as Rambouillet predominate in the range sections for very good reasons, but in farming districts where flocks are small or more restricted, any one of the medium wool breeds with the exception of the Cheviot would be a good choice. Breeds of the long wool type are not so popular as in early years. Breeders would do well to study the characteristics of their chosen type or breed and be familiar with objectionable or disqualifying features.

What is meant by Grading-Up? Even though a beginning were made with mediocre ewes of uncertain breeding, grading-up through several generations with good rams of the chosen breed will result in a breeding flock of superior quality. Native ewes are excellent for this purpose. In some sections flocks may be established with fine wool or range ewes of Rambouillet breeding. Such sheep seem inferior in mutton conformation but have certain definite advantages for foundation; they are hardy; they have long breeding lives; they yield heavy clips of wool and cross to excellent practical advantage with rams of mutton breeds.

What are the Essential Points in Selecting Ewes? Irrespective of the breed elected, it is important that all animals be sound and capable of raising vigorous lambs. Ewes which have "broken mouths", that is those which have lost some teeth on account of age, cannot be purchased with confidence; the loss of incisors reduces the ewe's ability to make use of her feed and raise a good lamb. Only those ewes which are free from abnormalities in the udder should be considered and any that are not perfectly normal in their breathing should be rejected; "lungers" will prove disappointing. It is important that attention be given to the quality and quantity of wool. Those that shear heavy clips of wool should be favoured; long fibres and density should be sought to ensure good yield. The good fleeces are uniform and not unduly coarse on the thighs.

In Selecting Foundation Stock, What Age of Ewes Would be Best? Yearlings which will lamb for the first time at two years of age will command the highest prices. Such ewes have their entire breeding lives ahead of them and represent desirable foundation

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material. Nevertheless, the advantages of lower cost and reduced overhead are obvious and the older ewes, four and five years old, if sound in mouth and udder and priced accordingly, may represent suitable and economical material.

What are the Main Points in Choosing a Ram? The ram should be a good representative of his breed. Mutton type should be emphasized in rams heading farm flocks, and thick bodies, short necks, deep chests, wide backs and loins, thick and level hind quarters, masculine heads adequate wool covering and strong bone should be stressed. A ram lamb, if well grown, should be capable of breeding up to 15 or 20 ewes but in large flocks, rams of a year or more should be used. A mature ram can breed 50 to 75 ewes in the season depending somewhat upon whether hand or flock breeding is practised.

At What Age are Ewes Bred? Ewes are commonly bred for the first time when a year and a half old so that they lamb at the age of two years. Where ewe lambs are well grown, some flock owners will breed them to lamb at one year but usually little more than half of such young ewes will get with lamb.

What is Meant by "Flushing"? Flushing consists of improving the condition of the ewes by means of better feed like succulent forage, second growth alfalfa, clover aftermath, or even grain, a few weeks prior to the breeding season, to stimulate the reproductive system and thus ensure a higher percentage of twins.

When is the Breeding Season? With most breeds, the breeding season is restricted to the autumn and early winter, some time after the weather begins to be cool. The periods of oestrus last one to three days and recur at intervals of 14 to 19 days.

What Special Care Does the Ram Require at Breeding Time? A ram that is neither thin nor very fat will be most certain as a breeder. He will require good feed both before and during the breeding season. It will conserve the ram's breeding capacity if he is allowed to run with the flock during the day time only; separation during the night will permit extra feed and better rest.

What is the Period of Gestation in Sheep? It is approximately 147 days although there is some variation depending on type and breed. The slower maturing Rambouillet for example will go five or seven days longer than the early maturing Southdown.

What are the Essential Precautions at Lambing Time? If losses are to be minimized, lambing season demands the full time of an attendant or shepherd. Many ewes will require assistance. When mother and lamb or lambs are not penned by themselves, separations and estrangements may result in losses. The use of small pens in the sheep barn or shed, just big enough to accommodate the ewe and her progeny are recommended. With lambs as with other young animals, the first milk or colostrum possesses qualities which make it essential to the best progress of the young.

How Can Chilled Lambs be Revived? Where lambing begins early in the spring, the chilling of new born lambs may result in severe loss. Chilling should be prevented if possible. Chilled lambs often can be saved however by means of artificial heat and assistance in nursing. The best method of reviving a chilled lamb involves placing it in a box beside the stove or placing a jug of hot water in the box beside the lamb.

How Should Orphan Lambs be Handled? Orphan lambs can be raised successfully on cow's milk. The milk need not be diluted or modified but should be clean and warm and fed often for the first days and weeks. Eight or ten feeds a day at the beginning would not be too often and only a little should be given at a time. At first, feeding will be done by means of a bottle and nipple.

When should Docking and Castration be Done? All lambs should be docked and all males not intended for breeding should be castrated when between one and three weeks of age. Both operations can be done at one catching, and preferably early on a bright day.

What is the Common Method of Castration and Docking? The lamb must be held by an attendant while the operator cuts off the lower part of the scrotum with a sharp knife and then pulls the testicles out. Cleanliness is an essential. Docking may be done with a knife, a hot chisel or pincers. Docking is done to improve cleanliness and appearance and prevent maggot infestation. The cut should be made about one inch from the body, as measured on the underside.

At What Time Should Shearing be Done? Shearing is a springtime operation and is timed to follow lambing and to come after the cold weather is past. In Western Canada, it is done about that latter part of May and in the East a little earlier.

Is it Important That Sheep be Dipped? To control external parasites and for increased efficiency, the flock should be dipped once or twice a year. The spring dipping, done about 10 days or two weeks after shearing, is considered very important. There is a good deal to be said for a dipping in the autumn as well.

What Precautions Should be Taken to Avoid Internal Parasites? When flocks are being established on new ground, the dangers are minimized. It may be profitable however to treat the breeding stock for worms and thus remove the source of infection. Where possible in all cases, lambs should be carried on clean ground.

At What Age are Lambs Weaned? Weaning is commonly done when the lambs are four and one half to five months.

Feeding

What Kind of Feed do Sheep Like? Sheep eat and like nearly all kinds of plants and seeds. They prefer the finer grasses and clovers. They like variety in their diet and if they are allowed to select their own food they will graze over large areas. They do not like mature coarse-stemmed plants. Being ruminants sheep live almost entirely on grasses and roughages.

How Much Feed do Sheep Eat? Five to six sheep eat about the same amount of feed as one mature cattle beast. A pregnant ewe weighing 125 to 150 pounds will eat from 3 to 5 pounds of good roughage per day. More feed will be needed if it is of low quality. Grain is seldom fed at the rate of more than 2 pounds per sheep per day.

Will a Flock of Sheep Help to Keep Farm Weeds Under Control? Yes—Sheep readily eat nearly every variety of weed. They do not like Canada thistle or stinkweed. To use sheep as weed eradicators careful consideration must be given to their management.

What Type of Pasture do Sheep Like? In general sheep prefer highland or rolling pastures. They like a mixture of plants preferably containing some legumes. Well grazed grass is liked better than long coarse feed. A mixture of fine grasses and legumes makes an excellent pasture for sheep.

Does Sweet Clover Make a Satisfactory Sheep Pasture? Seeded by itself sweet clover does not make a very desirable pasture. By itself sweet clover is inclined to be laxative. The stems are frequently coarse and not readily eaten unless the stand is very thick. Sweet clover may advantageously be seeded with a mixture of grasses.

Should Alfalfa be Used as a Sheep Pasture? There is some danger in pasturing sheep on alfalfa. All legume pastures have a tendency to bloat sheep and this is particularly true of alfalfa. The danger from bloating is reduced in dry seasons. A mixture of grasses and alfalfa is a much safer pasture than alfalfa alone. If sheep have access to a grass pasture or any kind of dry feed they are less likely to bloat on alfalfa.

Is it necessary to Seed Special Pastures, such as Rape, for Late Summer or Fall Use? The necessity of providing succulent fall pasture depends upon a number of factors, such as, the size of the farm, the size of the flock and the availability of feed. Rape makes an excellent supplemental pasture and on small farms heavily stocked it supplies an abundance of pasture at a time when the dry ewes and the weaned lambs are greatly benefited; a field of rape ensures against pasture shortages in dry seasons.

What Quantity of Feed do Sheep Require for Winter Use? The amount of winter feed needed varies in different seasons and in different parts of the country. For instance in some localities of the West sheep may obtain considerable pasture for a portion of the winter, while in other localities the flock gets little or no winter pasture. In the East the snowfall is too heavy to permit any grazing in the winter. A sheep eats from 3 to 5 pounds of good roughage per day depending on its size. From this, one is able to calculate the amount of feed necessary for the winter. Naturally less dry roughage will be needed if grain, ensilage or other feeds are used.

What is the Best Hay for Winter Feeding? For sheep feeding, good legume hay has no equal. Leafy, green clovers or alfalfa hays are not only palatable but they furnish both protein and essential minerals. Legume hays are especially valuable for pregnant ewes, as a satisfactory lamb crop, is largely determined by the way ewes have been wintered.

What Roughages are Undesirable as Feed for Sheep? Sheep do not like any of the coarse stemmed mature grass hays. Ripe brome, crested wheat grass or timothy hay are of little value for sheep. Cereal straws are an extremely poor feed. However, the straw that is fine and leafy and which contains quantities of clovers, grasses and weeds may have considerable value. It may be used to supplement legume hays. Coarse, lowland hay has little value as a sheep feed. If grass or cereal hays are to be used they should be harvested early and well cured.

What Succulent Feed can be Fed to Sheep? Corn silage and roots especially turnips are the most common succulents fed to sheep. They add variety to the ration and tend to keep the ewes in a thrifty condition. Three or four pounds a day is about the most that should be fed per sheep. Three to four weeks before lambing the amount should be reduced to two pounds. However, after lambing, the full amount could be resumed. Turnips are especially valuable for the milking ewe. Corn silage should be sweet and free from mould.

Is it Necessary to Feed Grain to Breeding Ewes during the Winter? Ewes that are in good condition in the fall and have good quality roughages need little or no grain if lambing is delayed until late spring. The amount of grain to feed depends upon the quality of the fodder and the date of lambing. Ewes should be individually examined from time to time to determine their condition, and grain should be given if they are losing in flesh. Grain is usually recommended during the month previous to lambing and should be continued until the sheep go to pasture. In the case of using poor fodders it is generally recommended to feed one-half pounds of grain per day during the entire winter. Grain should never be more than coarsely ground.

Do Sheep Require Salt—and is Block Salt Satisfactory? Sheep should have a supply of salt throughout the year. Records indicate that they eat about one-quarter of an ounce per day if they can get it. Sheep are unable to get enough salt when it is supplied in the block form. Salt is particularly necessary during the winter when the flock is on dry feed. It encourages a higher consumption of water and tends to prevent constipation. All stock salt should contain iodine. If iodized salt is not procurable add potassium iodide to the salt.

Do Sheep Need Minerals Other Than Common Salt? When sheep are supplied with a well balanced ration containing legumes, or legumes and grain, they seldom require minerals other than iodized salt. Lacking a legume feed and grain, the ration may be low in phosphorus. An easy way of adding phosphorus is by combining bonemeal and common salt in equal parts and allowing the sheep to eat what they want. Recent research reports indicate that cobalt is lacking in certain areas in Alberta when a non-leguminous feed was used.

Do Sheep Require Water, During the Winter, When Snow is Available? Sheep require considerable water and the amount they obtain from snow is insufficient to keep them healthy.

Is There Any Need of Providing Outside Exercise for the Flock During the Winter? There is a tendency to confine the bred ewes too closely during the winter months. Exercise is essential and prelambling troubles will be partially eliminated if the ewes are forced to move around out of doors each day. A portion of the feed in a sheltered spot on the snow, at a distance from the barn will often accomplish results.

Has Feed Any Effect Upon the Quantity, Strength, and Quality of the Wool? Yes, the quantity, strength and the quality of the fleeces is directly affected by the kind of ration used. Undernutrition or sickness frequently causes weak spots in the wool fibre.

Do Lambs Require Grain Feed to Fatten Them for Market? Lambs from farm flocks dropped in the spring should reach market from July to October, direct from the ewes. Late born and unfinished lambs of the smaller breeds should be put on a special feed, including grain, to increase their weight and improve their condition. Lambs on full feed should make a daily gain from one-quarter to one-third pounds. Lambs produced on the range usually require from 60 to 90 days special feeding to get them in suitable market condition.

Shelters

Do Sheep Require Expensive Buildings? Shelters for sheep need not be expensive. Depending on the severity of the climate, the amount of snowfall and the size of the flock, the shelter may vary from the simplest straw shed capable of sheltering a few sheep to the large and elaborate sheep barn capable of housing hundreds of sheep.

What are the Essentials in the Construction of Sheep Shelters? Whatever the type adopted, there are certain essentials which must never be forgotten in building sheep shelters. These are: location, warmth, dryness, light, ventilation and floors.

What is Meant by Location? Sheep buildings should be located on dry, well-drained ground with no obstructions to sunlight and good air outlets. A southern slope if available is to be preferred. In order to save time in caring for the flock the barn should be located near other farm buildings especially if no feed storage is available.

Do Sheep Require Warm Buildings? Sheep do not require warm buildings. Except in cases where lambing occurs in cold weather, a single wall with slats on the joints will provide ample protection.

How do Dryness and Light Affect the Sheep? Sheep are very sensitive to dampness. Any barn which does not keep the feet and coats dry is a failure. Light is just as important. Lack of sunlight invites the collection of dirt and filth both of which are detrimental to the health and thrift of the sheep. As a rule one square foot of window for each 20 square feet of floor space is sufficient.

Do Sheep Need Fresh Air? Close confinement in poorly ventilated pens is injurious to the breeding ewes. Consequently the barn should admit an abundance of fresh air and what is more important, no draught should be created. During the winter when doors are open all day and often all night, there is always plenty of fresh air. However, during lambing, when doors are closed, ventilation becomes necessary. Windows can be used as air inlets, but outlets must also be provided. Air outlets should start from the ceiling and there should be 8 or 10 square inches per sheep.

What Type of Floors is to be Preferred? The best and also generally the cheapest floors are those with a surface of clay well drained and level. For alleys and feed rooms, wood floors are satisfactory. Breeding ewes require 12 to 16 square feet of floor space and young stock 5 to 8 square feet.

Where can I Get Supplementary Information About Feeding, Care of Wool, Plans for Buildings, etc? Write to the Publicity and Extension Division, Department of Agriculture, Ottawa, the nearest Experimental Farm or Agricultural College.