



GETTING STARTED IN SHEEP

LIVESTOCK AGRICULTURE

What Kind of Sheep Should I Buy?

Sheep management, as with other classes of livestock, depends on available resources and demands of the marketplace. The producer's goals and the environment the animals must live in will determine the type of operation.

There are four types of sheep enterprises:

Commercial Lamb Production

The majority of Saskatchewan sheep producers raise market lambs, which are later fed to produce meat for the consumer's plate. Most often a crossbred ewe is bred to a purebred ram, and all lambs are marked as commercial lambs. A useful crossbred ewe should be prolific, a good milker, and produce lambs which mature quickly with quality carcasses. The ram should be capable of siring thrifty, uniform, fast-gaining lambs of desirable carcass quality.

Ewes are bred to lamb between January and May, with top dollar going to those lambs which reach the market earliest. Only the best ewe lambs in the flock should be kept to replace ewes which are culled.

Out-of-season breeding with appropriate breeds means lambs are produced year-around, providing a more consistent supply for the marketplace. The degree of success depends on feeding and management.

Production of Crossbred Ewes

Production of carefully-selected crossbred replacement ewes is a growing part of the industry.

These ewes are the result of crossing two or three purebred strains to utilize the most desirable characteristics of each. Hybrid vigor results in desirable ewes for commercial lamb production. Fertility, longevity, and mothering ability are some of the traits which are advantageous in crossbred ewes.

Lambing should take place in January to April, so that ewe lambs will be capable of breeding in late fall.

Purebred Sheep Production

Purebred sheep breeders produce foundation breeding stock, with defined breeding programs designed to improve commercial sheep production. A purebred animal should show the distinct characteristics of the breed, and be eligible for registration in the breed association.

Sound management practices are essential to ensure purebred seedstock will compete in the marketplace. The flock should be enrolled in the Record of Performance (ROP) home test program, and promising young rams entered in the ROP Ram Test Station. These programs track performance, and are an important part of selecting improved genetics which will be kept for breeding stock.

A well-defined genetic program also includes the culling of animals which do not carry appropriate genetics or are reproductively-unfit for siring offspring. These should not be sold for breeding purposes. Lambing is often in December or January to ensure lambs are grown out for fall breeding, and rams are eligible to enter ROP Test Stations.

Initial cost per animal is usually higher than commercial sheep. This is probably not the place to start as a novice shepherd.

Feedlot Lamb Production

Lambs weighing 40 to 70 pounds are placed into a drylot and fed hay, grain and supplements to a targeted endpoint. At 95 to 115 pounds, they are marketed as butcher lambs. A suitable enclosure with shelter and good water is needed. Profits depend upon the relationship between the value of the grower lamb, and selling price of the finished lamb. Sound feeding practices and a careful study of the market is essential.

This is probably not an area for the beginner until some experience in feeding lambs, and a knowledge of the market, is established.

Sheep Types

Suffolk and Hampshire represent the black-faced breeds in Saskatchewan. White-faced breeds generally used are Dorset, Rambouillet, Colombia, North Country Cheviot, and Arcotts. Romanov and Katahdins are represented to a lesser degree at this time. Crossbred ewes are often produced from white-faced ewes bred to black-faced rams. Your choice of breed will be determined largely by environment/management interactions and market intended.

Read the breed literature, talk to producers, and visit as many operations as possible before making a decision. A complete understanding of the marketplace, and sizes/types of finish lambs needed by your customer is key to success.

For first-time producers, 25 head or less is best suited when in the learning stages.

Wool Production

Wool production has not been a major part of the industry. However, some producers have focused management and breeding toward this market as a complement to market lamb production. Specialty flocks produce wool for hand spinners and weavers, usually coloured sheep which are crosses of Karakul, Rambouillet and Colombia. Other specialty breeds such as Shetland and Lincoln are bred for this market, and exist in relatively small numbers within the province.

Total Confinement

Ewes and lambs are kept in corrals or barns year-round, fed to their requirements while maximizing production. Ewes will be flushed (fed grain prior to breeding) to increase the occurrence of multiple births. Grain is also fed prior to lambing, and during lactation. Lambs will be creep-fed, with water, salt, and minerals made available.

Confinement tends to be a higher cost method of production.

Partial Confinement

Lambs are confined and creep-fed to market weight, while ewes graze on pasture after weaning. Ewes are fed in confinement during the winter.

Pasture Run

This is the traditional method of production, with ewes on pasture bred in the late fall for spring lambing. Ewes and lambs are pastured throughout the summer, and lambs are shipped to market in the fall. Some producers take advantage of community sheep pastures or special grazing projects to provide summer rangeland.

Predator control has been a challenge in pasture environments. However the addition of guard dogs or donkeys, and electric fencing has greatly reduced losses.

Shelters and Equipment

Existing farm buildings can easily be converted into adequate sheep shelter or lambing facilities. Sheep need to be cool, dry and free from drafts. A pole shed, open to the south, is adequate protection in winter. When lambing in winter, a building which can be partially heated is essential to the livelihood of new-born lambs.

Lambing pens, where a ewe and her lambs can be placed for several days, can be built of panels which can be dismantled during the rest of the year. Space for a claiming pen with five to eight ewes and their lambs should adjoin the lambing area. Portable 12 to 16 foot panels are ideal for many small operations. These can be moved about as needed to form pens, corrals, chutes and so on.

A sorting and handling pen/chute, with a place for a scale, makes life easier for breeding, vaccinating, weighing, and loading sheep for sale. Except for the breeding season, rams will need a small corral and shelter which is separate from the ewes.

What Will I Need for Feed?

While sheep can survive on “cleaning up around the buildings,” proper nutrition is essential for acceptable production levels. Ewes which look after twins and triplets, adequately produce milk, produce good quality fleece and are resistant to pregnancy toxemia need good feed to get them there.

Sheep are not nutritionally-wise. It is a common misconception to think sheep will do better than cattle on poor quality feed. They need adequate levels of nutrition to ensure lambing percentages of 150% to 180%. Don't plan your feeding program around straw.

On pasture, the sheep flock will need water and access to salt and minerals. Sheep are sensitive to copper, and cattle minerals contain levels usually too high for the average sheep flock. This varies with the area of the province, and in some instances, by breed of sheep.

During the winter or with total confinement operations, hay must be fed. Chopped hay is more easily supplemented and mixed with a protein supplement depending on the needs of the ewe. Alfalfa is superior feed if it has been properly cut and baled. Grain should be fed whole to all ages of sheep. Course, stemmy hay is only utilized properly by chopping. It is not recommended that any feed be fed off the ground.

Unless ewes are in excellent condition, it may be necessary to flush them by feeding grain for several weeks before and during the breeding season. This should increase the lambing per cent. Rams should also be fed grain during these periods. Ewes also need grain during the last four weeks of pregnancy, as well as during lactation in confinement. Amount of grain and additional supplement will depend on the quality of grains fed, amount and type of hay/pasture, and the number of lambs the ewe is nursing. It is important to feed according to body condition, as over-fat ewes and rams will not usually breed successfully.

Lambs should have access to creep feed soon after birth. The creep area should be a comfortable place for the lambs (warm, draft-free, well-lit), and not accessible to the ewes. Creep feeders should be designed to keep the feed clean.

After weaning, lamb feed rations are gradually changed over a two-week period, to a mixture of whole grain (barley is best) and a commercial protein/mineral/vitamin supplement.

Sheep need access at all times to salt and a calcium-phosphorus mineral. Vitamins A, D and E are sometimes added or injected. Selenium is given in areas of the province which are selenium-deficient. Contact your Livestock Agrolgist for further nutritional information.

Water

All sheep, including small lambs, must have access to clean, fresh water. Cold running water is preferred, and ewes nursing lambs need water to adequately nurse their young.

Diseases and Parasites

Proper feed and management go a long way in preventing serious disease and parasite infestations in sheep flocks. Sheep should be treated at least once a year for internal and external parasites, by injection or drench method.

It is advisable to vaccinate lambs for clostridial diseases, using an 8-way vaccine. Booster doses are important to ensure annual immunity levels. Lambs should also be vaccinated for enterotoxemia (pulpy kidney or over-eating disease). In some cases, ewes should be vaccinated for this disease prior to lambing. A multiple vaccine can be used for clostridial and enterotoxemia diseases.

Seremouth is a viral disease affecting any age of sheep, most often lambs. Take care when handling sheep with this disease as it is transferable to humans. Pregnant women should not be handling lamb fetuses or any other material, as other diseases may be transferable as well.

Where Do I Market My Product?

The Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board assembles loads every two weeks at points throughout the province. Producers can phone the office as lambs approach market weight, and the office will arrange a drop-off point at a specified time and location.

In addition, there are various sales held in the fall throughout the province. Most are annual events, including the Tompkins Sale held in October, which is the largest sale in western Canada. A variety of sheep are also sold at local auction barns, while some are purchased by livestock buyers on-farm. Finished lamb carcasses are sold at farm-gate to private customers, making up a portion of domestic lamb consumption.

Wool is assembled at three depots located at Tompkins, Pilot Butte, and Saskatoon. Some wool is also sold privately to the home-spinning industry.

Agriculture

Agriculture Knowledge Centre
Toll Free: **1-866-457-2377**

Livestock Development Branch
Telephone: (306) 933-5099

*** Canadian Sheep Federation - website:**

http://www.cansheep.ca/english/home_e.htm

*** Canadian Co-operative Wool Growers Ltd. - website:** <http://www.wool.ca/>

*** Pasture Locations**

Tompkins Sheep Pasture (306) 622-2028

Mortlach Sheep Pasture (306) 756-2442

Elbow Leafy Spurge Project (306) 933-5200

*** Sask-First Lamb Feeder Co-op - E-mail:** slfc@sksheep.com

*** Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board - website:** <http://www.sksheep.com/>

*** Saskatchewan Sheep Breeders Association - website:** <http://www.ssba.org/>

*** University of Saskatchewan - website:** <http://www.usask.ca/wcvm/>

*** Wool Collection Depots:**

Canadian Co-operative Wool Growers Ltd. - website:

<http://www.wool.ca/> (under About Wool)

*** Sheep Supplies and Equipment**

Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board - website: <http://www.sksheep.com/>

Books and Manuals

The following resources are available by contacting the Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board:

Website: <http://www.sksheep.com/>

Telephone: (306) 933-5200

A Practical Guide to Profitable Sheep Production - Meg Smart, DVM

A Practical Guide to Sheep Disease Management - Norman Gates, DVM

An Introduction to Keeping Sheep - Jane Upton, Dennis Soden

Chilled and Weak Lambs - Laura Lawson

Detecting, Diagnosing & Treating Lamb Problems - Laura Lawson

Fleece In Your Hands - Beverly Home

Managing Your Ewe (and her newborn lamb) - Laura Lawson

More Sheep, More Grass, More Money - Peter Schroedter
Sheep Ailments - Eddie Straiton
Sheep and Goat Science - Ensinger and Parker
Sheep Housing and Equipment Handbook - North Dakota State University
Storey's Guide to Raising Sheep - Paula Simmons and Carol Ekarius
Tan Your Hide! Home Tanning Leathers and Furs - Phyllis Hobson
The Farmer's Dog - John Holmes
The Merck Veterinary Manual
The Veterinary Book for Sheep Farmers - David Henderson
The Western Canadian Sheep Production Manual
Turning Wool Into a Cottage Industry - Paula Simmons

Videos

Lamb Survival
Lambing Time Management - three tapes
One Woman and Her Dog
Preparing Sheep for Show
Shearing Techniques
Sheep Ectoparasite Control - David Henderson
Starting Your Border Collie
That'll Do! (training stockdogs)
Working With Wool

Books and Magazines

1. *Sheep Shape*

Newsletter of Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board
Box 5025
Saskatoon, SK S7K 4E3
(306)933-5200

2. *Sheep Canada magazine*

1489 Route 560
Deerville, NB E7K 1W7
Toll Free 1-888-241-5124
gallivan@sheepcanada.com
<http://www.sheepcanada.com/>

3. *The Shepherd's Journal*

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Mossleigh, Alberta T0L 1P0
(403)534-2185