

Raising a Small Flock of Sheep



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This leaflet gives basic information about raising a small flock of sheep. It has been prepared especially for families in Appalachia, a region that includes all of West Virginia and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The information, however, can be used almost anywhere in the United States.

Many of the suggestions in this leaflet are not suited to large, commercial sheep enterprises.

On January 24, 1978, four USDA agencies—Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Cooperative State Research Service (CSRS), Extension Service (ES), and the National Agricultural Library (NAL)—merged to become a new organization, the Science and Education Administration (SEA), U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Raising a Small Flock of Sheep

If you have grassland and good fences, sheep may be well suited to your place. Sheep produce two crops a year—lambs and wool—as well as meat for the family.

Sheep take less labor than some kinds of livestock and get along well with low-cost housing and equipment. This means you can start with a few ewes and “grow” into the sheep business. A small flock costs less, and you can give it better care. There is generally less chance of disease and parasites.

If you find that you like sheep, and do well, you can enlarge your flock by keeping the best ewe lambs. You can double the number of breeding ewes in your flock in a few years.

As the size of your flock increases, you will need to get more information on how to produce and manage sheep. Keep in touch with your county agricultural agent or your extension sheep specialist and get his help.

GETTING STARTED

Talk to farmers in your area who are raising sheep. How well are they doing? Where do they get their hay? What grains do they feed? Do they

shear their own sheep and butcher their own lambs? Where do they sell their wool and lambs?

When you get the answers to these questions, you can decide if you want to raise sheep.

Buying Ewes

Fall is usually the best time to buy sheep. They cost less then.

Talk with your county agent and with sheepmen in your neighborhood who belong to State or local sheep breeders associations. These men know where to get good ewes and when sheep sales are held.

Look for ewes that produce good wool and satisfactory market lambs. A grade (not purebred) ewe of this type costs \$30 to \$50 or more.

Yearling or 2-year-old ewes are a better buy than older stock. They have more productive years ahead of them.

If you buy native stock, pick a breed that has done well in your neighborhood. Get vigorous ewes that have produced well on the pasture and the feed similar to what you will be using.

Ewes from western ranges, if given good care and bred with a strong,

mutton-type ram, often produce satisfactory lambs up to the time they are 8 to 10 years old. They usually cost less than younger stock.

Your chances for success with sheep will be much better if you avoid buying—

- Ewes that are lame. Foot rot is a common and troublesome disease.
- Ewes with unsound udders.

COSTS AND RETURNS FOR A BREEDING EWE

If you buy a breeding ewe for.....	\$100
And sell her in 5 years for.....	20.00
The cost for 5 years is.....	80.00
Cost for 1 year is.....	16.00
Ewe eats about 75 pounds of concentrate.....	6.50
And 500 pounds of mixed hay.....	15.00
Shearing costs.....	1.50
Breeding charge is.....	5.00
Which adds up to.....	44.00
Interest at 10% (8 months).....	3.00
Cost plus interest.....	47.00
But you sell one lamb for.....	65.00
And one wool fleece for.....	7.75
Which adds up to.....	72.75
The difference between gross receipts.....	72.75
And total costs.....	47.00
Is your return per ewe per year...	25.75

(This is based on one lamb per ewe per year without predator losses. Predator losses, on the average, would reduce the return by at least \$8.00. On the other hand, increasing the lamb crop by 20% by superior breeding stock and good management would increase the net return by about \$8.00 in the absence of predator losses.)

● Ewes that have had mastitis with resulting spoiled udders.

● Ewes with worn or missing teeth—a sign of old age.

Use a Purebred Ram

Even if you have only a few ewes, they should be bred with a purebred ram. Get the service of a ram that has a record of producing good lambs. The breeding charge is \$4 to \$6 per ewe.

When you are ready to buy a purebred ram, expect to pay \$100 or more for him. You can buy a ram on your own or in partnership. Try to buy one that is sound, fertile, and 18 months to 3 years of age. Such a ram can safely be bred to 50 ewes in a period of 40 to 50 days if he is strong, has good care, and is well fed.

HOUSING AND EQUIPMENT

You don't need fancy buildings or expensive equipment for sheep. Chances are you can use or convert a barn or shed already on the place.

If you are handy with tools, you can easily make feeders, pens, and troughs that you may need. These do not cost much to build, especially if you have usable poles or lumber on hand. Figure 1 shows two hay racks suitable for small flocks.

Shelter for Sheep

You must provide some protection for the flock during wet or cold weather, and a dry, draft-free shelter for ewes and lambs at lambing time.

A shed or barn that opens to the south makes a good sheep shelter. Sheep like lots of sun, light, and air.

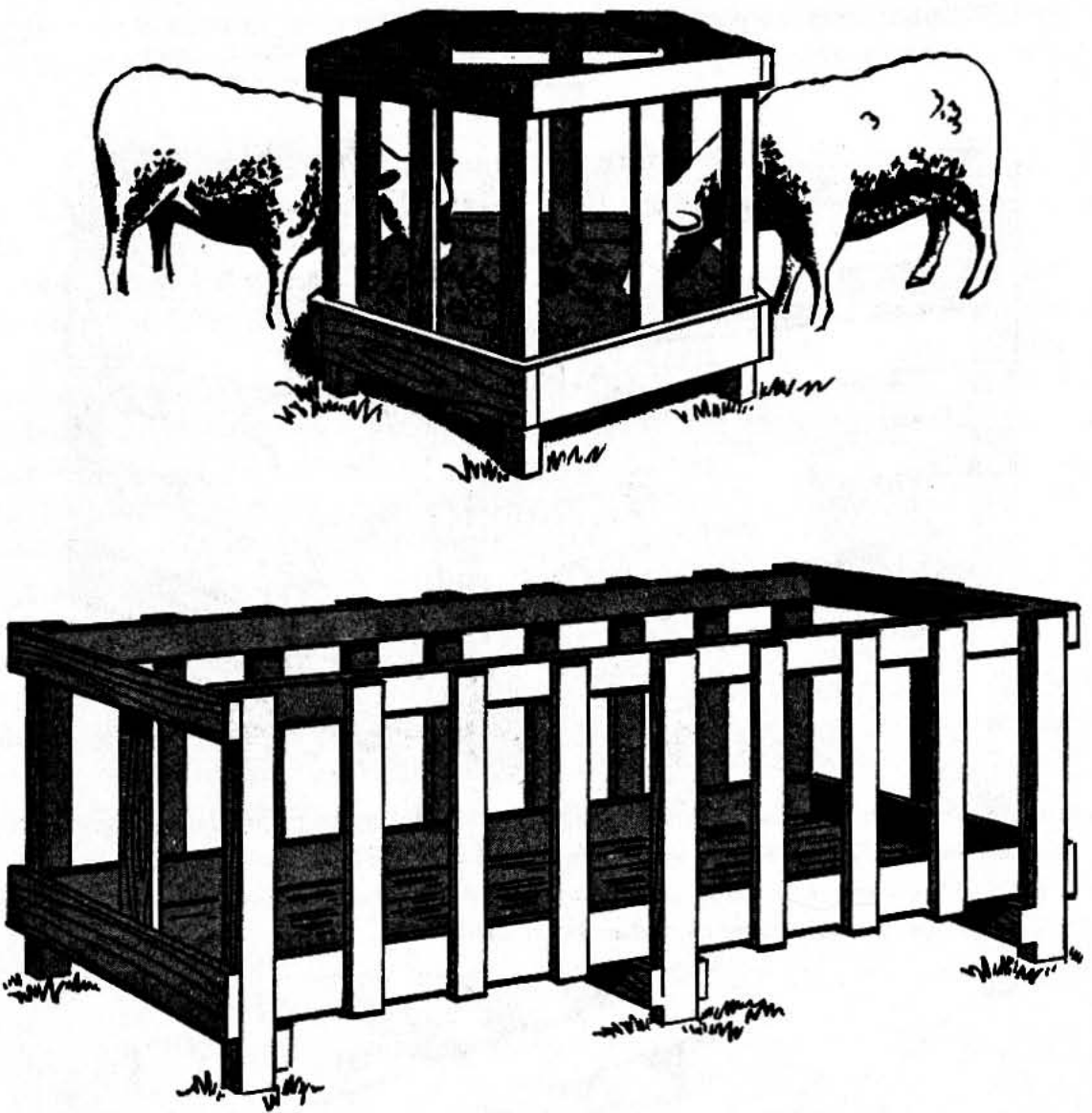


Figure 1.—A five-sided hay rack (top) is simple to build, easily moved, and takes care of 10 sheep at a time. Each of the sides is about 2 feet long with a center divider. Openings should be 9 to 12 inches wide, the width depending on the size of sheep you have. A rectangular hay rack (bottom) is usually made 8 to 12 feet long. Twenty sheep can be fed hay at one time with this rack.

A dirt floor in the shed is satisfactory.

You ought to have one lambing pen for every five ewes in the flock. You can easily make such a pen by placing a hinged panel across a corner. See figure 2, page 6.

A lamb creep allows baby lambs to feed, but keeps ewes out. There are a

number of ways to make a lamb creep. See figure 3, page 7. The important point is that openings into the creep, where the lambs' feed trough is placed, are about 8 inches wide and about 18 inches high. Also the creep has to be near where the ewes feed and the lambs gather. Otherwise you won't get the lambs into the creep to the feed.

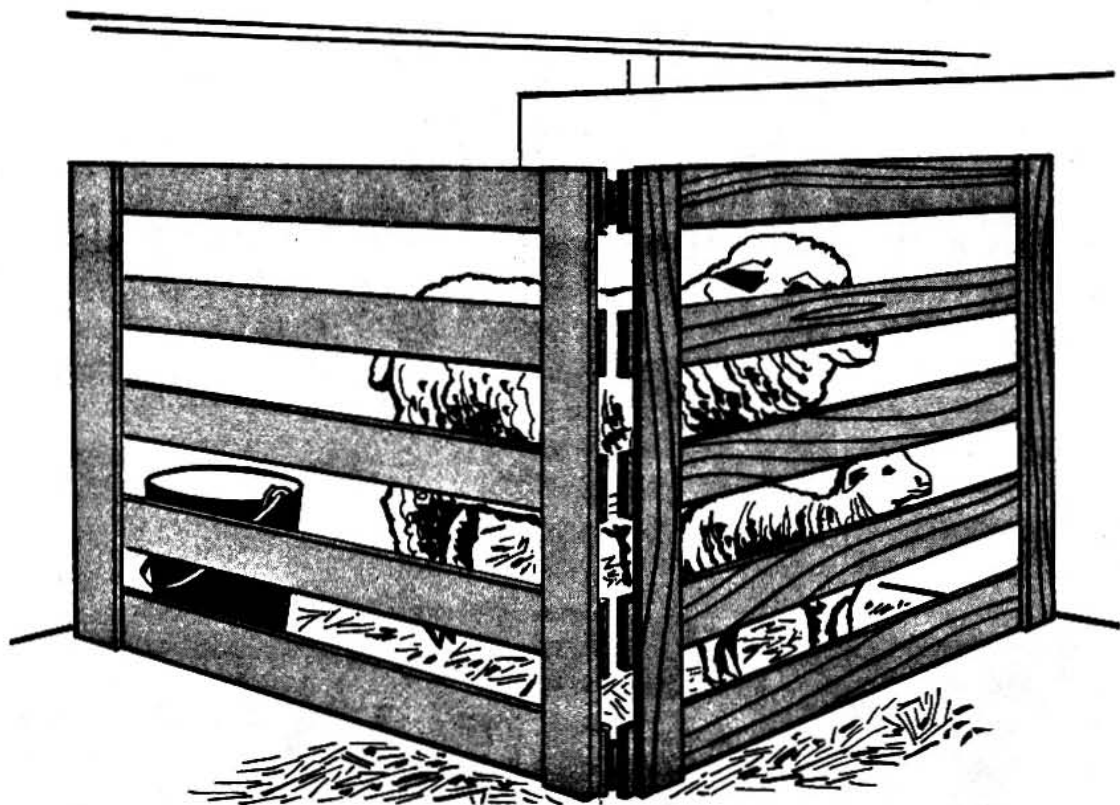


Figure 2.—You can set up a temporary lambing pen like this by simply placing a hinged panel across an inside corner of your sheep barn. Each half of the panel should be 3 to 4 feet high and 4 to 5 feet long. A 5-inch strap hinge can be used to hold the panel halves together. Spaces between boards should be no more than 3 or 4 inches.

Fences

Provide the best fences you can afford for your sheep. Without strong fences, losses from sheep-killing dogs can be heavy.

Unfortunately, the best kind of sheep fence is expensive to build. It combines woven and barbed wire and is 56 to 58 inches high. Posts are 7 1/2 feet long and are set 2 1/2 feet in the ground.

This fence has a strand of tightly stretched barbed wire close to the ground. Above this is 36-inch woven-wire fencing with a 4-inch mesh, and above this are two strands of barbed wire.

The cost of the materials needed to enclose 1 acre with this kind of fence would be over \$300. This amount would pay for the 36-inch woven-wire fencing, barbed wire and steel posts, but not for labor. A gate would be extra.

An electric fence will work for sheep if they are carefully trained with it.

If you have a farm woodlot that can provide the fence posts, the cost of the fence would be much less. Osage-orange, black locust, and cedar make long-lasting posts. Other durable woods are catalpa, red mulberry, black walnut, and sassafras.

Fence posts should be cut from the heartwood of the tree if possible.

have had instruction in these practices. See your county agent.

Useful Equipment

If it becomes necessary to dip your sheep to control lice, mites, ticks, and other skin parasites, you'll need a vat or tub of some kind.

Other helpful items include: Hand shears; foot-trimming tools; small pruning shears; a sharp pocket knife for docking and castrating; drenching syringe for treating sheep for worms and other internal parasites; iodine for treating the navels of newborn lambs; pigment for ram's brisket to mark ewes served; a foot bath trough for treating foot rot; and a bottle of disinfectant.

Do not attempt foot trimming, worming, or castration unless you

PASTURE AND FEED

Grazing Sheep

Pasture is the cheapest feed for sheep, so make full use of it. Sheep eat a wide variety of grasses, but prefer those that are short and fine.

Native bluegrass mixed with other grasses, such as clover, fescue, and orchardgrass, is excellent pasture for sheep.

A top dressing of nitrogen on bluegrass will insure extra early growth. One acre of well-established bluegrass, properly managed and fertilized, is enough to graze five or six ewes. If pasture is unimproved, 1 acre may carry only two or three ewes.

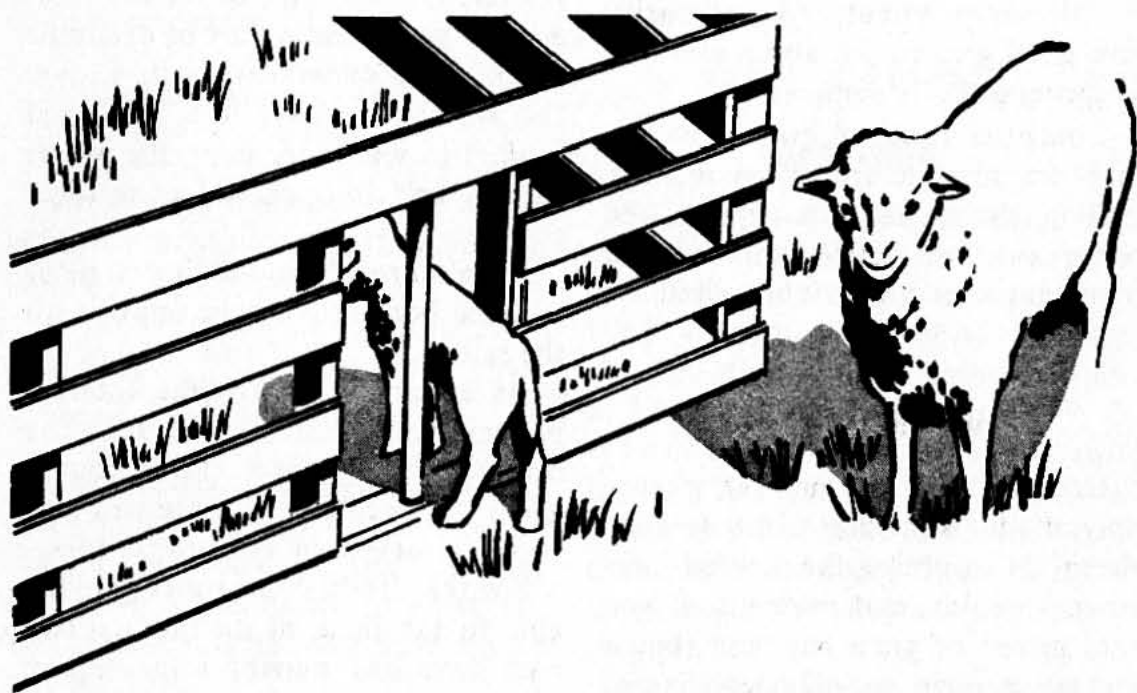


Figure 3.—The panel shown here serves as entrance to the lamb creep. If the creep can be placed in a corner of the barn, you may need to build only the entrance panel and one side of the creep. If no corner is available, you may need to provide the entrance panel and two sides. Openings in the creep panel should be about 8 inches wide and about 18 inches high.

Start grazing bluegrass in the spring when the new growth is 3 to 6 inches high. No other feed is necessary when grass is young and abundant.

Do not rely on bluegrass for pasture all summer. When it begins to dry up, put your sheep on temporary pasture.

You can grow pasture for mid-summer grazing and hay for winter feeding by sowing a piece of land with Korean (annual) lespedeza. Sow lespedeza in the spring at the rate of 10 pounds per acre.

As soon as the lespedeza gets about 10 inches high, cut it for hay. An acre will yield 1 to 1 1/2 tons of hay. When bluegrass gives out in July and August, turn sheep on the lespedeza. Let them graze it until bluegrass returns in the fall. An acre of lespedeza will graze four or five ewes.

Sudangrass, rape, and kale can also be used for summer pasture.

Fall-sown wheat, rye, or barley give good grazing for about a month in spring or early summer.

Combinations of grass and hay that are suitable for sheep include: Ladino clover and brome grass; red clover and timothy; alfalfa and brome grass; and birdsfoot trefoil.

Winter Feed

Good-quality legume hay, preferably alfalfa, is the best winter feed for sheep. It contains the needed proteins, vitamins, and minerals. If you feed mixed or grass hay, you should include protein supplement (linseed or soybean meal) daily with the hay to balance the ration.

Three to four pounds of alfalfa or other hay a day is enough for a ewe

weighing 140 pounds or less. Start to feed hay as soon as ewes are taken off pasture in the fall and continue to feed it until ewes are back on pasture after lambing.

Hay is usually fed for about 5 months, but the length of time will vary with the season and kind and amount of pasture available.

You will need about 500 pounds of hay per ewe during the winter. This much alfalfa will cost about \$18. Mixed hay will cost less—about \$15 for 500 pounds.

Most of a sheep's living comes from pasture and hay. Grain is fed only at certain times during the year. Ewes generally need grain about 100 days. They should have grain 30 days before lambing. If ewes nurse lambs

Keep granular iodized salt before sheep and lambs throughout the year. If there is a shortage of certain minerals in your area, it may be desirable to use trace mineralized salt. Locate the salt box where it is protected from the weather, near the water supply, and in a shaded spot when possible.

Equal parts of ground limestone or steamed bonemeal can be mixed with the salt.

As an aid in controlling internal parasites, phenothiazine may be mixed with the salt. Your county agent or sheep supply store can give you information on amounts to mix.

See that fresh, clean water is available to the flock at all times. Pregnant ewes and nursing ewes require large amounts of water. Sheep will drink more water in winter if water is warmed.

after lambing, continue grain daily until spring pasture is available.

One-half to three-quarters of a pound of grain a day per ewe is enough. Feed the grain that is most economical for you. Ground shelled corn is an excellent feed for sheep, especially if you want them to gain weight. Ground oats and barley also are satisfactory.

For a pregnant or fresh ewe getting high-quality legume hay, a good daily ration is—

Alfalfa, lespedeza, or clover hay—

3 to 4 pounds.

Corn, oats, or barley— $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ pounds.

It will take about 500 pounds of hay and about 75 pounds of grain to winter one ewe. Hay will cost about \$15; grain about \$3. So the total cost of feeding one ewe this ration 100 days is about \$18.00.

A pregnant or fresh ewe that gets mixed or grass hay should be fed a daily winter ration of—

Mixed or grass hay—3 to 4 pounds.

Concentrate— $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ pound.

An efficient concentrate for a ewe not getting legume hay is made by mixing—

Corn—20 pounds.

Oats—20 pounds.

Linseed or soybean meal—6 pounds.

This amount of concentrate would cost about \$2.00 and would feed one ewe for about 70 days. The total cost of feeding a ewe mixed or grass hay and concentrate for 100 days would be about \$17.

If you raise all or part of the hay and grain you feed, your feed costs will be cut considerably.

To get quick gains on lambs, start

giving them a little ground grain in a creep (see fig. 3, p. 7) at 5 to 10 days of age. At the same time, offer them a little leafy hay. Increase the grain and hay gradually as the lambs get used to it. By the time the lambs are 60 to 70 days old, they will eat about $\frac{1}{2}$ pound of grain daily.

Creep feed lambs until they are weaned or marketed—at about 4 months of age or 70 to 90 pounds in weight.

An excellent ration for creep feeding a lamb is—

Shelled ground corn—7 pounds.

Oats (rolled, crushed, or crimped)—

3 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds.

Wheat bran—1 pound.

Molasses—1 pound.

Salt—3 ounces.

Minerals—3 ounces.

This amount of mixture would feed a lamb for about a month and would cost about 38 cents.

MANAGEMENT

Breeding

The normal breeding season for sheep is in the fall. Generally ewes are first bred at 18 months of age. They lamb when they are about 2 years old. Breeding ewes as lambs to lamb at 1 year is increasing.

Ewes come in heat in late August or early September. The periods in which ewes will breed last from 1 to 3 days and recur every 14 to 19 days. Ewes should be gaining weight when they are bred.

The length of time from breeding to lambing is about 140 to 150 days. Ewes bred in September lamb in February. You can then market lambs born in winter before the start of the

summer season when parasites get bad and your grass is poor.

If you buy a ram to breed your ewes, get him well in advance of breeding time so he can get used to his new home. Give him a little grain to get him in good condition.

When your flock is small and you only use one ram, you need a way of knowing when each ewe has been bred so you can figure about when she will lamb. Pigment smeared on the ram's brisket every day or so shows which ewes he has mounted. Any commercial coloring (yellow, red, or ordinary lamp black) can be used. Mix the color with castor, linseed, or old crankcase oil.

After 2 weeks, change the pigment color. If, after a few days, most of the ewes marked with the first color are coming back into heat, a new ram should be used.

Lambing

A good sheepman prepares for lambing time. Extra care at this time saves lambs and keeps ewes in good condition.

As lambing time nears, observe the ewes closely. At least 2 to 4 weeks before lambing, clip wool and tags around the udder and hindquarters of the ewes with hand shears. This makes it easy for newborn lambs to nurse.

Separate every ewe about to lamb from the rest of the flock, and make sure that she does not lamb outside in cold weather.

Just before or shortly after she lambs, put her in a dry, well-bedded lambing pen. Set the pen up in the warmest part of the shed or barn. See that there are no drafts.

A well-fed ewe seldom has trouble in lambing. However, if a ewe strains strongly and does not deliver within 30 minutes, get help from a person who has had experience delivering lambs. If such a person is not available, call a veterinarian. Make sure ahead of time that you can get help quickly if you need it.

Shortly after the lamb is born, dip its navel cord in a 4-percent solution of iodine. This helps prevent navel infections. Make sure that the lamb is dried promptly and does not chill.

Be sure that the ewe has "taken" to her lamb and that the lamb nurses within 30 minutes. Most lambs stand on their feet and nurse without help shortly after birth.

If the lamb is weak, help it to nurse. If the lamb is cold, get it warm as soon as you can.

After the lamb has gained a little strength, it usually gets up by itself. If it does not, repeat the feeding. It is especially important that lambs get the ewes' first milk (colostrum).

Keep the ewe and lamb in the lambing pen for 12 to 24 hours. This allows a "mothering up" period and saves lambs that might be disowned or trampled.

After lambing, add grain gradually to the ewe's feed. By the time her lamb is 10 days or 2 weeks old, she should be getting a full ration of grain or concentrate along with hay.

SHEARING AND MARKETING WOOL

Sheep are usually sheared after lambing in the spring when cold wet weather has passed. You can shear as early as mid-March in most southeastern areas if you do it in a warm,

All lambs—male and female—should be docked (tails removed) and male lambs castrated by the time they are 14 days of age.

To find out how to dock and castrate lambs, see your county agent or someone with experience in sheep raising.

dry shed. If you don't have such a shed, it is best to wait for mild weather. All fleeces should be off before summer.

Do not feed sheep for 10 hours before shearing. Shearing should be done on a clean dry floor, or on a heavy canvas spread over a bedded sheep pen. Make sure that fleeces are clean and dry before shearing.

Shearing is not easy for beginners. In some areas, county agents can direct you to a shearing school where you can learn how to shear.

Most owners of small flocks find it pays to get a custom shearer. If the shearer cannot come to your place, you can probably take your sheep to a neighboring sheep farm and get them shorn when the shearer is there. The usual charge for shearing sheep is about \$2 to \$3 a head. Some shearers dip sheep at a reasonable cost after shearing.

A good shearer takes all of the wool from a sheep in one piece—with no second cuts and no injury to the animal.

After the fleece is off, spread it out on a clean dry floor with skin side down. Remove all heavy tags, sweat locks, and short leg wool from the main fleece. Put these clippings in a bag for separate sale.

Then roll the fleece from the rear toward the front so the shoulder wool is on the outside. Tie the fleece with

paper twine. Do not use binder or coarse twine or wire of any kind.

Place the tied fleece in a regular wool bag or a clean feed bag and store it in a clean, dry place until it is marketed.

You and other wool growers in your neighborhood may be able to sell your wool through one of the more than 140 cooperative wool pools in this country. Your county agent will know if there is such a pool in your area.

If you sell through a pool, you deliver your wool to a certain location on a certain day. The pool takes bids from buyers. As soon as a buyer pays for your wool, the pool pays you, minus a small marketing fee.

Many of the large wool pools offer other services, such as supply departments that handle shearing equipment, wool bags, twine, and drugs. Once you get in a wool pool, you are kept informed of all activities.

The average fleece weight per sheep in the United States is about 8 pounds. Some fleeces weigh as little as 4 pounds and some as much as 12 pounds—the weight depending on the breed of sheep and age.

In addition to the amount you receive for the fleece when you sell it, the U.S. Department of Agriculture makes an incentive payment to all persons who raise sheep and sell wool. The incentive payment is the amount needed to bring the price per pound to 72 cents. This means that an 8-pound fleece, properly prepared for market, brings about \$6.

To get the incentive payment, you must take your wool sale receipts to your local Agricultural Stabilization

and Conservation office (there is one in most counties in the United States) and make application. In due time, you will receive the extra payment.

KEEPING SHEEP HEALTHY

Watch sheep for signs of disease. Some diseases can be helped by home treatment, but most of them need the attention of a veterinarian.

You can help prevent disease by—

- **Starting with, and adding, only healthy sheep from healthy flocks.**
- Housing sheep in clean, dry, well-ventilated quarters.
- Feeding properly and providing clean water.

Sheep are attacked by many parasites. Prevention of these parasites is better than cure. Ask your county agent for information on parasites and on the diseases that parasites cause in sheep.

You can help control parasites by—

- Treating (drenching) at least once a year for internal worms.
- Keeping medicated salt available at all times.
- Dipping for lice, mange, mites, and other external parasites if necessary.
- Weaning early.
- Changing pasture whenever possible. Pasture rotation is important in parasite control.

LAMB FOR YOUR TABLE

Generally a lamb can be slaughtered for home use any time after it reaches 100 pounds liveweight. Most ewe lambs are kept for the flock.

A 100-pound lamb usually yields a 50-pound carcass and about 35 pounds of meat (worth \$30.00 or more) for your table.

Lambs reach 100 pounds in 110 to 140 days. A lamb more than 1 year old does not put on enough weight to pay for its feed.

Extra feed can be made available to any healthy male lamb you want to slaughter for home use. You can either see that he gets more concentrate on pasture, or you can confine him and give him extra concentrate.

The day before slaughter, pen the lamb so he can be caught easily. Give him plenty of water, but withhold all feed for 24 hours before slaughtering. This makes dressing simpler.

For more information on how to slaughter, cut, and process lamb on the farm, ask your county agent for a copy of Farmers' Bulletin 2264 "Lamb Slaughtering, Cutting, Preserving, and Cooking on the Farm." Or get a free copy by sending a post card with the name and number of the publication to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Governmental and Public Affairs, Washington, D.C. 20250. Be sure to include your ZIP Code with your return address.

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