

TEXAS BREEDING SHEEP GUIDE¹

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guide is to provide information to leaders, parents, and young people for the development of successful breeding sheep projects. The breeding sheep project is an on going project that will cover all aspects of sheep production during the year. It can be a very educational, rewarding, and profitable experience.

FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT

The facilities and equipment necessary for your breeding sheep project are very important. They should be built and ready for use when you select your sheep and get them home.

Pens and Shelter

Your sheep pen should be big enough to provide for sufficient exercise, shelter from cold, rainy weather, and enough shade to shelter them during the hot summer months. There is no set guide as to pen space per head, but with breeding sheep, the larger the pen the better. A good rule of thumb would be at least 500 square feet of pen space per head and approximately 30 square feet of shelter space per head. The pen and shelter areas should be well drained. Fence height should be at least 42 inches to discourage jumping and should be dog proof.

Feeders

Your breeding sheep project can either be hand-fed or self-fed. All feeders (grain, hay, salt, and mineral) should be built off the ground so the sheep cannot get their feet in them or lay in them. If hand-feeding, allow a minimum of 1 ½ linear feet of trough space per sheep. If self-feeding, allow approximately 6 to 8 inches of trough space per sheep. Self-feeding allows more flexibility in managing time and labor, while hand-feeding gives you the opportunity to more closely observe your sheep on an individual basis. Hand-feeding gives you the opportunity to control intake so that your sheep do not get too fat.

Water

Clean water is a key factor for any sheep project. Water troughs should be small so they can be drained and cleaned each day. An automatic float to control water level and to insure that water is always available is a good idea. Water troughs should be located in the shade to keep water cool during the summer. On cold winter days break the ice and allow sheep to drink.

SELECTION

When selecting breeding sheep you have a choice of woolled breeding sheep, medium wool breeding sheep, and hair breeding sheep. Woolled breeding sheep are evaluated on 50 to 60% body conformation and 40 to 50% fleece and include the Rambouillet, Delaine-Merino,

Debouillet, Columbia, Corriedale, and Targhee breeds. Medium wool breeding sheep are evaluated primarily on body conformation with little emphasis on fleece and include the Suffolk, Hampshire, Oxford, Shropshire, Southdown, Montadale, Dorset, and Cheviot. Hair breeding sheep are evaluated primarily on body conformation and include St. Croix, Barbados Blackbelly, Dorper, White Dorper, Katahdin, and Royal White. Not all shows in Texas will have classes for all of the above breeds. The most common breeds shown in Texas are Rambouillet, Delaine-Merino, Columbia, Corriedale, Suffolk, Hampshire, Southdown, Dorset, Dorper, White Dorper, and Royal White.

The selection of breeding sheep should include the following traits: structural correctness, growth, muscling, breed and sex character, fleece, and freedom from defects. Each of the above mentioned selection criteria will be discussed.

Structural Correctness

Structure generally refers to the skeletal makeup or bone structure of an animal and how it is put together. Generally, structure problems only get worse as the sheep gets older. Breeding sheep should travel and stand wide and straight on both their front and rear legs. The leg bones should be large, the pasterns should be short and strong, and the hooves should be correctly shaped and rest squarely on the ground. Do not select sheep that have a tendency to stand toed out on the front legs or hocked in or bow legged on the hind legs. Select breeding sheep whose necks come out of the top of a neat, clean set of shoulders, have a straight, strong top and level rump, and are wide at the pin bones. Open shouldered, U-necked, weak topped, steep rump sheep should be avoided.

Growth

It is important that breeding sheep be able to grow quickly and efficiently. This inherent trait of growth potential or yearling weight is highly heritable and essential if sheep are to be profitable. In selecting ram lambs or ewe lambs that will not only be taller and longer but also heavier as yearlings, one should pay particular attention to the skeletal structure of a sheep. Generally, sheep with greater growth potential are more extreme in their design. They have a longer head and neck, are longer bodied, taller at the point of the hip, and longer in their cannon bone. There has been some tendency to select sheep that are extreme as lambs and are very shallow bodied, tubular, and frail in their design. It is important to remember that pounds are as important as height in breeding sheep. A shallow bodied, frail sheep will be less efficient and not have the overall growth potential of a sheep with the above mentioned growth indicators plus some depth of rib and volume.

Muscling

Generally, medium wool breeding sheep and many breeds of hair sheep are heavier muscled than woolled breeding sheep and more emphasis is placed on muscle when selecting medium wool and hair breeding sheep. However, muscle is extremely important in all three types. Muscle should be analyzed through the shoulder, down the top, and through the leg. Indicators of muscle in the shoulder are a prominent forearm, wide chest floor, and some expression of muscle throughout

the shoulder. However, coarseness or an open shoulder is a sign of an early maturing sheep with a tendency to become fat quickly or sire lambs with more delivery problems at birth. The rack region behind the shoulder should be smooth and not break or dip and be a continuation of the natural muscling expressed in the shoulder. The loin and rump, which comprise the hindsaddle, should be as wide and long as possible. Since carcass traits are highly heritable, muscling of the hindsaddle is extremely important. The rump should also be level. The leg, the largest single region of muscling, should possess natural thickness and muscle expression through the top, center, and lower portion. The amount of muscle in the lower portion of the leg or stifle region of a young or thin lamb is a good indicator of muscling.

Breed and Sex Character

Breed character is important in selecting breeding sheep for show. Before buying or selecting breeding sheep, be well aware of what is acceptable breed character and what is not. Breed associations and/or registered breeders should be consulted before selecting sheep for a project. When selecting breeding sheep rams should look masculine and ewes should look feminine. Rams should have a larger, more masculine head, more bone, and adequate testicular size. Ewes should be feminine, refined, and angular. Their heads should be long with a sharp look from eye to muzzle with a long pendulous ear in the larger breeds.

Fleece

It has already been mentioned that 40 to 50% of the evaluation of woolled breeding sheep is on the fleece while little emphasis is placed on the fleece in evaluating medium wool and hair breeding sheep. In medium wool breeding sheep, the main concern is that the fleeces be free from colored fibers as they do not take dye to the same extent as white fibers. In hair breeding sheep, the main concern is that the fleece will shed. Other wool traits for medium wool and hair breeding sheep are of minor importance.

Most major shows in Texas have shearing rules for woolled breeding sheep which allow judges to more accurately evaluate fleeces. Be sure to read the rules and regulations of the shows you plan to attend so you will know when to shear your breeding sheep.

The wool traits that are important in evaluating woolled breeding sheep are pounds of wool, grade (fiber diameter) and uniformity of grade, length, yield, density, character, belly wool, wool blindness, and hairy britch.

Pounds of wool is the most important wool trait in selecting woolled breeding sheep. However, when judging animals in the wool, fleece weight is not available. The pounds of wool an animal will shear is a result of body surface area (size), fiber diameter, density, and staple length, therefore, these traits should be evaluated to estimate pounds of wool.

Grade (fineness or fiber diameter) is the major price determining factor of wool as finer wool is generally worth more. Different breeds of sheep have different grades of wool so make sure the grade of wool on your sheep is characteristic of the breed. Uniformity of grade is also extremely

important. The finest part of a fleece is generally on the shoulder and the coarsest part is on the lower portion of the hind leg called the britch. When selecting breeding sheep make sure the fleece is as uniform as possible and the fiber diameter meets breed standards.

Length of fiber is the second most important (behind diameter) fleece value determinant. The ultimate use of wool (fine garments, blankets, carpets, etc.) is determined by fiber diameter and length. Sheep should grow staple length wool in a twelve month period. For example, finewools must be at least 3 inches long to qualify as staple length and command the highest price. As fiber length decreases, so does the potential uses for that fiber. It should be remembered that as length increases density generally decreases and coarser fibers generally grow faster and longer than finer fibers.

Yield is the amount (percent) of clean fiber produced from a given volume of grease fiber after it has been scoured (washed). The amount of grease (lanolin) and dirt found in the fleece will adversely affect yield. As a general rule, finer wool yield less than coarser wools. Yield, along with grade and length, are the three traits that most affect the value of a fleece.

Density is the number of fibers per square surface of body area. As density increases length generally decreases, therefore, one must reach a happy medium between length and density. In addition, as density increases clean wool yield generally increases.

Character refers to the color, crimp, and handle of wool. A creamy, white, bright color is superior to wool with any discoloration. Crimp is the term used to describe the natural wavy appearance of wool. Generally, the more crimps per unit of length the finer the wool. Handle refers to the relative softness or harshness of wool. Fine wools are normally softer and less harsh than coarse wools.

Belly wool as the name implies, is found on the belly (underside) of sheep. Compared to the remainder of the fleece, this wool is shorter, weaker, less dense, lower yielding, and of a different character, however, it is generally finer than the average of the fleece. Sheep which exhibit belly wool on the side, shoulder, or back should not be selected.

Wool blindness refers to the amount of wool on the face of sheep. Open-faced sheep are better producers than are wool-blind sheep. Breeding sheep should have an open channel, free of wool, from the eyes to the nose. This trait is highly heritable and should be selected against.

Hairy britch is the appearance of coarse hair on the lower hind leg or britch of a sheep. This is a contaminant which increases fleece fiber diameter and decreases uniformity of grade. It should be selected against.

Defects

There are several defects which should be selected against. The wool defects of colored fiber, belly wool, wool blindness, and hairy britch have already been discussed. Other defects include wrinkles or skin folds, jaw defects, abnormal testicles, and inverted eyelids.

Wrinkles or skin folds are a problem with finewool breeding sheep but can be a problem with all sheep. Wrinkles create problems at shearing and negatively affect the appearance of a sheep. Generally speaking, smooth sheep shear less pounds of grease wool than wrinkled sheep but it is higher yielding and will result in approximately the same amount of clean wool.

Jaw defects are the failure of the incisor teeth (lower jaw) to properly meet the dental pad (upper jaw). This interferes with the ability of the animal to graze. In some, the lower jaw is shorter than the upper jaw and the teeth do not extend to the end of the pad. This condition is known as parrot mouth. In others, the lower jaw is longer than the upper jaw and the teeth extend beyond the pad. These animals should be culled.

Abnormal testicles refer to small or abnormal sized testicles and to the cryptorchid condition in which one or both testicles are retained in the abdominal cavity. Rams with abnormal testicles should be culled.

Inverted eyelids (entropion) is the condition in which either the upper or lower eyelid is turned in and causes irritation which eventually will lead to blindness if not treated. This condition can be corrected but since it is a heritable trait animals having this condition should be culled.

NUTRITION

It is important that breeding sheep be properly fed and managed to realize the maximum genetic potential for growth and development. Any nutrition program must consider the five basic nutrients: water, protein, energy (carbohydrates and fats), minerals, and vitamins.

Water

Water is one of the most critical nutrients in a feeding program as it regulates the amount of feed a sheep will consume. Clean, fresh water is necessary on a daily basis. Water is an important component of the body as lean tissue consists of over 70% water and all body fluids depend on water. Water provides the fluids necessary to keep the body functioning properly.

Protein

Protein is the primary constituent of the body, therefore, protein from the diet serves to maintain or replace protein in body tissues, provides for carriers of other nutrients, and is a major component of various products such as meat, milk, and fiber. Protein requirements for breeding sheep vary according to size, age, sex, and stage and level of production. Young, fast-growing lambs need higher protein diets to allow them to grow and develop. Creep rations containing approximately 18% protein are useful during the first 2 to 3 months of life. It is important to

remember that only natural protein sources should be used for young, growing lambs. Rations containing approximately 15% protein can be used during the growing phase.

Energy

Energy is necessary for efficient utilization of nutrients. Energy is generally not a problem with high quality breeding sheep rations. Grains and protein supplements are high in energy with hay being intermediate.

Minerals

Minerals of major concern in sheep rations are salt (sodium and chlorine), calcium, and phosphorus. It is recommended that loose salt and a loose ruminant mineral be fed free choice at all times. Calcium and phosphorus, in the appropriate ratio, are necessary for proper growth and development. The ratio in the ration should be approximately 2 parts calcium to one part phosphorus. Calcium carbonate may be added to high energy sheep rations to bring the calcium:phosphorus ratio up to 2:1. Rations which contain high levels of phosphorus in relation to calcium may cause urinary calculi, particularly in rams. The addition of ammonium chloride at the rate of 10 pounds per ton of ration will prevent urinary calculi. Roughages are generally high in calcium and low in phosphorus. Grains are generally low in calcium and intermediate in phosphorus. Most protein supplements are high in phosphorus and intermediate in calcium.

Vitamins

Vitamins are required by sheep in very small amounts, however, they are essential for proper body function. Of all vitamins, only vitamin A is likely to be deficient. If sheep are receiving alfalfa hay or dehydrated alfalfa hay pellets in the ration, vitamin A should not be a problem.

Management

The amount and kind of feed fed to a sheep can make a big difference in the eventual outcome of that animal. If you are raising your own show sheep, remember that it is not only important to feed your brood ewes properly, but also have available a good creep feed for your young lambs. As the milk production in a ewe begins to decrease, lambs will take advantage of a palatable creep ration and make economical, efficient gains.

There are many types of creep rations for lambs. When selecting a creep ration, make sure it is palatable, high in protein, contains a proper mineral balance, contains ammonium chloride, does not contain too much roughage or fiber, and has antibiotics. Since lambs need more protein during the early stages of life, a good creep ration should contain 16 to 18% protein. Remember that young lambs have only a small stomach area and their rumen is not fully developed, therefore, a creep ration should be high in protein and energy and low in the bulky roughages that are hard to digest. It is also important to add ground limestone (calcium carbonate) to balance the high phosphorus content of feed grains and a low level of antibiotics to aid in the prevention of overeating, pneumonia, or other bacterial diseases. Following is a sample creep ration.

Creep Ration - 18% crude protein

600 lb. Crimped, rolled, or chopped corn and/or milo
600 lb. Crimped or rolled oats
350 lb. Soybean or cottonseed meal
200 lb. Alfalfa pellets or meal
200 lb. Molasses
30 lb. Calcium carbonate
10 lb. Salt
10 lb. Ammonium chloride
25 grams Aureomycin

After weaning or as soon as you buy your prospective show sheep, they should be put on a growing ration. A growing ration will be different from a creep ration in that it contains a much higher amount of bulky feed or roughage. However, it needs to be palatable, have enough protein, contain ammonium chloride, contain a proper mineral balance, and antibiotics, if necessary. A growing ration can be a complete feed containing cottonseed hulls or alfalfa pellets as a roughage source or can be a high quality hay with a grain supplement. A good growing ration should contain 14 to 16% protein. Following is a sample growing ration.

Growing Ration - 15% crude protein

475 lb. Crimped, rolled, or chopped corn and/or milo
475 lb. Crimped or rolled oats
300 lb. Cottonseed hulls
250 lb. Cottonseed meal
250 lb. Alfalfa pellets or meal
200 lb. Molasses
20 lb. Calcium carbonate
20 lb. Salt
10 lb. Ammonium chloride
20 grams Aureomycin

Rations can either be self-fed (keeping feed in front of them at all times) or hand-fed (feeding only enough feed that the sheep will clean up in 10 to 15 minutes at a feeding). Self-feeding breeding sheep is much easier and requires less time, however, ewes tend to become overly fat. It is recommended that breeding sheep be hand-fed if possible allowing you to more accurately evaluate your sheep each day. It will mean more to the young person by giving him/her a daily responsibility. Breeding sheep should receive enough feed each day to be in good condition and allow them to grow but should never be allowed to become excessive in condition. It is important to be patient and slowly develop breeding sheep. Ram lambs will certainly eat more feed than ewe lambs due to their larger body size and later maturity pattern. Handle your sheep

often, especially if they are in long wool, to make sure they are in proper condition. Lambs should be on a growing ration throughout the year or show season.

HEALTH

Healthy sheep are important to the success of a breeding sheep project. Sick sheep and sheep which have problems with disease never grow and develop to reach their genetic potential. The key to maintaining a healthy sheep is the development of a preventative health program.

Enterotoxemia or Overeating Disease

One of the greatest causes of death in sheep is enterotoxemia or overeating disease. The most common symptom or sign of enterotoxemia is sudden death. This disease is caused by a clostridial organism which is normally present in the bowel of most sheep. Sheep which have their feeding schedule abruptly changed or take on large amounts of grain are the most subject to enterotoxemia. These changes cause the clostridial organism to grow rapidly and produce a powerful toxin which causes death in a few hours. There are two types of enterotoxemia, clostridium perfringens types C and D. Your breeding sheep should be vaccinated for enterotoxemia when you get them with a vaccine that is a clostridium perfringens type C, D and tetanus toxoid combination. Multiple vaccinations for enterotoxemia are recommended. A total of two and maybe three vaccinations is preferred, with the booster doses coming three to four weeks following the first vaccination. Using a good vaccination program should result in no losses from enterotoxemia in your breeding sheep.

Soremouth

Soremouth can be a nagging problem for breeding sheep. This contagious disease causes the formation of scabs on the lips and around the mouth of sheep. This is a virus which can affect humans so care should be exercised when working with sheep with soremouth. Few medicines help in the treatment of soremouth. Iodine can be rubbed into the lesions after the scabs are removed and this will help to dry up the area and reduce the infection. The Texas Agricultural Experiment Station in Sonora manufactures an excellent soremouth vaccine. This vaccine contains many strains of the organism and will help to prevent sheep from having soremouth just prior to or during a show. The vaccine is a live virus and is applied to a small scratched area of the sheep where a scab is developed and the sheep develops immunity against further inoculations.

Internal Parasites

Internal parasites are a continual problem in a breeding sheep program. When you first get your breeding sheep they should immediately be drenched for internal parasites and a second drenching should follow about three weeks later. There are not many approved drenches for internal parasites in sheep. You should consult a veterinarian or Extension agent in your area for recommendations on products that are effective and on the time to administer. Internal parasites

tend to build up a resistance to a drench if it is used over a long period of time. Rotating drenches may be effective in helping eliminate internal parasite problems.

Hoof Trimming

When sheep are confined to pens and fed well their hooves grow long and need to be trimmed often. Abnormal hoof growth can lead to problems with feet and leg structure and movement of sheep. Hooves need to be trimmed about every month or two. Always trim hooves one to two weeks before a show in case you should cut into the quick and temporarily cripple the sheep. This will give the sheep time to get well before the show.

Shearing

Breeding sheep need to be sheared after you get them as they will grow faster and more efficiently if sheared. Ideal shearing dates are after you get them in the summer and again on or after October 20. This enables you to evaluate the progress and growth of your sheep. Remember, in Texas, most major shows have a shearing date in their show rules for woolled breeding sheep. Some shows also have a shearing rule for medium wool breeding sheep. Check each set of show rules as to shearing dates and rules.

Observation

Careful observation of sheep on a daily basis is also a good preventative measure for a successful health program. Sheep which are not feeling good will generally not eat as quickly and may not clean up their feed. It is a good idea to routinely check the manure. Sheep with diarrhea generally have some type of problem. They have either had their feed changed too quickly, have consumed too much high energy feed, or they may have an internal parasite problem. Check sheep to see how they walk and to get a good impression of their overall thriftiness. Sheep with their ears hanging down and walking abnormally generally do not feel well. Watch your sheep continually and develop a preventative health program which will allow you the confidence of knowing that you have given your sheep adequate protection from those things which most often cause disease problems. Sheep which appear sick should receive treatment immediately to prevent more severe disease and health problems from occurring.

FITTING

Fitting breeding sheep is an art. Woolled breeding sheep are generally fitted differently than medium wool and hair breeding sheep because they are shown in the wool and are not washed.

Woolled Breeding Sheep

The necessary equipment needed to fit woolled breeding sheep is as follows: electric clippers with appropriate blades, hand shears, wool cards (2), hoof trimmers, curry comb, brush, bucket, spray bottle, wool rag, soap, trimming table, rope halters, blankets, and hoods.

There are some preliminary fitting procedures that need to be done 2 to 4 weeks before the show. They include trimming feed and shearing the wool from inside the rear legs. Trim feet early so that if you happen to trim them too close and temporarily cripple the sheep, they have time to heal and will be walking normally at show time. Shearing the inside of the rear legs gives your sheep a wider appearance as viewed from the rear. This is done early to give the skin time to return to that dirty or gray color (natural color).

Just prior to the show, breeding sheep must be completely fitted. Put the sheep on the trimming table and clean the wool by using a curry comb. A back and forth horizontal motion will clean the fleece. Spray or brush hot soapy water on until the sheep is fairly damp but not wet. Too much soap in the water is not good so only use about two tablespoons per bucket of water (one to two gallons). Next, begin carding the fleece. This takes a lot of time but is the most important part of fitting. It is much easier if you will clean the wool cards at frequent intervals. The next step is to trim the sheep. Keep your hand shears sharp at all times. Preferably, the various sections of the sheep should be trimmed in the following order: back, sides, belly, front, rear, and head. Remember to keep the fleece damp at all times.

After the animal has been completely fitted spray with hair conditioner. Take the wool card and spend about five minutes patting, not carding, the fleece. This will keep the fleece trimmed and looking good. In Texas, most woolled breeding sheep are not blanketed. Prior to entering the show ring, take a wool rag or hand towel and clean the sheep's face, ears, nostrils, and horns.

Medium Wool Breeding Sheep

Fitting medium wool breeding sheep is different in that they can either be shown in the wool or shorn slick and are always washed before they are shown. If shown in the wool, it is advisable to shear them one to two months before the show. This will give enough wool to work with when trimming and still have a small enough amount to make washing and drying easy. The other procedures are the same as outlined for woolled breeding sheep.

If sheep are shorn slick, they need to be washed and shorn immediately before the show. Care should be taken to do an extremely smooth job while shearing.

After fitting, medium wool breeding sheep should be blanketed and hooded to keep them clean until show time. Prior to entering the show ring, take a wool rag or hand towel and clean the sheep's ears, face, and nostrils. Do not use artificial coloring on medium wool breeding sheep.

Hair Breeding Sheep

Hair sheep are usually shorn slick a week or two before the show and washed before going into the show ring. If washing is not permitted at the show they are washed at home and be blanketed and hooded to keep them clean until show time. Prior to entering the show ring, take a wool rag or hand towel and clean the sheep's ears, face, and nostrils. Do not use artificial coloring on hair breeding sheep.

SHOWING

Showing is a very important segment of the breeding sheep program. It takes a great amount of work, time, and practice at home. Practice is very essential. Practice showing a little every day, especially 30 days prior to your first show.

The first step in showing is to halter break your sheep. Once the halter is on tie the sheep to the fence with his head high and as close as possible. This needs to be done every day for a week to 10 days. Care should be taken not to tie them where they can hurt themselves and you should not go off and leave them tied in case a sheep gets tangled or chokes.

The next step is to teach you sheep to stand. While sheep are tied to the fence you can begin to place their feet properly and get them accustomed to setting up for show. After your sheep has gentled down, remove the halter, take hold on both sides of the jaw with your hands and hold the sheep. Reach down with one hand and place the back feet squarely under the animal. Be sure the animal is standing in a normal position, not too stretched out and not too close. Next, press gently down on the jaw and/or neck so the animal will push slightly against you. This will tighten the muscles along the back and leg giving the judge a better handle on your sheep.

The third and final step is to teach your sheep to travel at your side. Stand up with the sheep's head and neck in the normal up position. Place one hand under the throat close to the jaw bone. Place the other hand at the dock to push him. By doing this repeatedly your sheep will learn to lead properly.

When showing, never put your hand on the sheep's back or behind the head or neck. Keep the animals head high and the front and back legs straight at all times. When you enter the show ring always be clean and neat. Stay alert and watch the judge at all times. You will, from time to time, be caught in tight positions. Always remember that good sportsmanship and courtesy are very important when you are at the show and in the show ring.