

My Yearly Cycle in Sheep Farming

—Ulf Kintzel

Raising sheep can be a profitable way of making a living. It can as well be a complementary side business for an existing dairy, beef, or crop farm. Or it can be an additional income for somebody who has an off-farm job. I am often asked what is involved in raising sheep. In this article I would like to outline a yearly overview. This yearly cycle is based on my specific grass-fed flock and it is not universally true.

Where in the year shall we start? Since this is the spring issue we might as well start with LAMBING. Lambing season is most likely the busiest season for any sheep farmer. This is the time when a lot of money can be made or lost. The percentage of raised lambs per ewe is one of the, if not *the*, most important economic figures in a sheep operation that raises market lambs.

I let one batch lamb in March in the barn and one batch lamb in late April and early May on pasture. Because of different seasons I am able to provide market lambs for a longer time period throughout the year. A new small winter lambing season in December is planned for 2009.

March lambing season: The ewes are separated from the flock a few days prior to lambing by means of a chute, watching for crayon coloring on the back of the ewes that is the result of the ram breeding them while wearing a harness, as well as reaching under the ewes to feel development of the udder. In the barn the ewes that need shearing will be shorn. All hoofs are trimmed and the ewes are de-wormed and vaccinated.

The lambing season in late April and early May takes place in the pasture. This lambing season is easier. More room can be offered, thus fewer lambs are rejected, and the weather is more favorable both for lamb survival and for the shepherd ambitious enough to check late evenings and early mornings. After a ewe has delivered her lambs, she and her offspring are loaded in the trailer, transported to the barn, and put in a jug for bonding. There the ewe is vaccinated and de-wormed, and the hoofs trimmed same as the March ewes were. Plus the lambs are



docked, castrated, and tagged.

I vaccinate routinely against Enterotoxemia. I choose Bar-Vac CD (note: no CD/T, T as in Tetanus) since it is the cheapest. If your sheep have contact with horses you do not want to skip the tetanus vaccination and use Bar-Vac CD/T.

After up to 24 hours of bonding, the ewe and her lambs are put in a group with other ewes with lambs. Group age of lambs should never be more than a week or ten days apart. Younger lambs can lose their mother when groups of lambs are playing. At 3 to 4 weeks when the lambs are able to move well with their mother, they get put back into the flock.

SPRING AND SUMMER PASTURE. I practice rotational grazing. I have woven wire fence along the road as perimeter fence. That helps me to sleep well at night. In the back of my farm I use electric nettings as perimeter fence and my entire interior fences are electric nettings as well. An electric netting is a prefabricated temporary fence with conductive horizontal twines, with built-in posts and connecting non-conductive verticals. This mesh of fence is usually 164 feet long. The fence is erected to create cells and taken down after a cell has been grazed. It can be rolled up for transportation or storage after taking it down. The fence is powered by an energizer of at least two Joules; the energizer is powered by a portable marine battery. Each cell is grazed for a minimum of one day and maximum of



5; rare exceptions are a week for convenience sake such as when we go on vacation.

I chose not to use permanent water lines and watering places. Instead, I use a trailer with a 320-gallon tank mounted on it. This way I can water wherever I wish and don't have the usual manure buildup that many permanent watering places have. The water is filled into 50-gallon troughs that are lower than cattle troughs, enabling the lambs to drink as well.

Sheep need to be supplemented with minerals. Sheep minerals should have no added copper. I mix the minerals with 1/3 salt while having nursing lambs and 2/3 salt otherwise, given in a high-wall rubber pig feeder. I skip feeding minerals on rainy days to avoid waste. Throughout the year I use a bag of minerals and a bag of salt for every dozen sheep.

When the temperature goes above 80 degrees, especially when the humidity is high, I offer shade for my sheep for the noon hours. Sometimes the shade is not a necessity but offered as comfort. Besides that, this practice is not only good shepherding, it also keeps production (i.e. gain of weight) high.

DE-WORMING. Spring through fall is the time worms thrive, with mid-summer the peak. I de-worm my sheep in the chute that goes alongside the barn. The Barber pole worm is the most dangerous of all internal parasites, since it is the deadliest. Anemia and sometimes a bottle jaw are the signs of an infestation with this stomach worm. Tapeworms can also be a significant negative economic factor in lambs. Ewes are immune to the tapeworm.

There are many strategies that should be used in concert in order to control internal parasites. Firstly, rotational grazing and leaving a residue of at least 3 to 4 inches (most worms inhabit those first 3 to 4 inches of growth) helps. A rotational schedule of at least 3 weeks interrupts the cycle of worms. Secondly, selecting sheep for resistance to worms is another strategy. This is done by culling those ewes that show signs of still having parasites after de-worming. Still, de-worming is needed in my opinion. One should avoid a regular schedule for de-worming, instead *de-worm when needed*. For ewes it is needed right around lambing when their immune system is at its weakest point. De-worming before breeding is appropriate and/or after the first real frost to get ewes "clean." Those two times often fall together. Lambs need de-worming at about 6 weeks of age and often another time at the height of summer, along with the ewes. In a wet year more de-worming might be needed, in a dry year maybe less.

White de-wormers (i.e. Safe-guard, Panacur, Valbazen, Synanthic) often do not work against the Barber pole worm, but clear de-wormers such as Levasole (Prohibit) and Ivomec do. I don't use Ivomec often since it has a greater risk of worms developing immunity to it. Levasole is often my de-wormer of choice. White de-wormers work against tapeworms and nematodes. Against tapeworms, Valbazen is my de-wormer of choice. I don't de-worm at the first clinical signs. I let more larvae hatch. That means I kill more adult worms and challenge the immune system of the sheep at the same time. However, this



bears the risk of waiting too long and the lambs will not as easily recover.

BUSH-HOGGING. I am a firm believer in bush-hogging my pastures at least once per year in order to control weeds, cut seed stems, and thus rejuvenate my pasture. I often go through my pastures a second time and target weeds again that I wish to eliminate or at least greatly reduce, such as Canadian and bull thistle.

MARKETING. Starting in late spring but mainly throughout the summer and fall I sell sheep and lambs for various purposes. I sell breeding stock. My high-percentage White Dorper ewe and ram lambs, as well as yearling ewes, are sought after because they are most suitable for a pasture-based sheep operation. In addition, these animals shed and don't need shearing. In times when wool prices are down and shearers are hard to get this is a big plus.

The biggest portion of my sales currently is still market lambs at 80 to 90 lbs. live weight. A big number of my market lambs go to various distributors that sell my lambs in high-end restaurants, vacation resorts, and the like—in places like Boston, New York City, and Vermont. I am fortunate that I have found Stephen Winkler from Certified Natural New York in Rodman, New York, who puts me in touch with high-end distributors such as Dole and Bailey in Massachusetts. Grass-fed is the new organic and is very much sought after. However, in order to sell to these customers I had to go through several farm inspections from the person who owns Certified Natural New York and had to meet certain standards of animal welfare.

I also direct market a good number of my lambs. I have a buying club in New Jersey who I serve twice a year. I sell custom butchered whole or half lambs. Most of these customers find me through my website. I do very little individual cuts and have very little inventory. However, some of that is necessary to offer interested people a roast or some chops in order to get them interested in placing an order for a whole or half lamb.

HERDING TRIAL. Every year on the first Saturday in October

I hold a herding trial. This trial is admission free and spectators are welcome. It is a German herding trial that reflects a shepherd's day in miniature. A flock of 200 sheep is used. The competitors are hobby people and train their dogs, mostly German Shepherds, for fun. Many dogs in the competition are of my breeding and many of the competitors trained their dogs with me. This has provided me with additional income for many years now.

BREEDING. Most sheep breeds start to cycle when the days get shorter. You determine your breeding season by asking yourself, "When do I want lambing season?" Then you count 145 days (5 months) backwards. That's when breeding starts.

I have a breeding season in October for a March lambing season and one breeding season in November for an April and May lambing season.

Ewes: A ewe cycles on average between 17 to 19 days. That means the bulk of the lambing season can be done within three weeks. A few ewes will return to season and need to get serviced a second time in order to get pregnant. I cull ewes that don't get pregnant after two breedings. This applies to adult ewes. I breed female lambs born in the spring at 7 and 8 months of age; 90 to 95 percent get impregnated. The rest will breed the year after.

The body condition is important. It is a problem if a ewe is too skinny or too fat. Two to three weeks prior to breeding I offer higher quality pasture. It increases the ovulation rate. This practice is called the flushing effect. However, the effectiveness is limited when the ewes are already in good condition. I also try to reduce stress during breeding. Stressed ewes ovulate less or lose lambs early. I limit the activity of herding dogs to a minimum. I offer shade, water, and minerals. There should be no limping sheep. I also de-worm breeding ewes prior to breeding. Ewes that are soiled in the rear I suggest clipping.

Rams: I prepare the rams by cutting their hoofs well before breeding and I de-worm them just before it. A good body condition is also necessary. I figure 100 to 120 ewes per ram per breeding season. I know many publications suggest 30 to 50 ewes. A ram that would serve so few ewes wouldn't make it at my place. Experienced rams should be calm breeders and not fighters. I don't tolerate aggressive rams. I use the "Cross Your Heart" breeding harness from Premier to track breeding. This harness stays better in place than any other I have used. I use lighter crayon colors first, for 17 days or one cycle. Then I use a darker color so that it covers the lighter color should a ewe return to season. The crayons come in three different temperature versions, warm, mild, and cold, and should be used accordingly. I separate ewes into groups if a second or third ram is needed to avoid inbreeding. I

also suggest writing everything down! I guarantee you will not remember five months later. I also suggest making sure that the rams are in a secure area *before* breeding season. If I had a dime for every time somebody told me that the breeding season was determined by the ram getting out of his paddock and in with the ewes.....

FALL AND WINTER GRAZING. From October through late December or early January, depending on the amount of snow and accessibility of fields, I still graze my sheep and don't need any hay. This saves me significant winter feeding costs. I graze my flock on neighbors' farms on harvested hay fields, wheat fields, red clover fields, and the like. I use my dogs to get the sheep to distant pasture. My electric nettings are used to keep sheep fenced. The grass stays fresh and green under the snow and keeps its nutrition. No water is needed when there is snow. I also graze my sheep on stock-piled grass on my own farm, especially during hunting season when nobody wants me on their property during that particular time.

WINTER FEEDING. Winter feeding time is from January through early April. I consider 100 winter feeding days but often only have 80 to 90. I feed first-cutting hay in round or large square bales. I buy all of my hay. I use a small 40-horsepower tractor with a front and a rear spear attachment to move the hay. Sometimes I load the hay on a modified hay wagon and pull it into the pasture. All hay feeding takes place in the pasture. Sheep are not housed in the winter but shelter is offered in severe weather such as in a cold wind. Shelter is most often an old shed that I have on my property.

FROST SEEDING. I frost seed mainly legumes to improve my pasture. I often use red clover simply because my neighbor harvests it and it is very reasonably priced. I try to frost seed 20 to 25 percent of my pasture acreage each year. I also frost seed newly rented fields that are either poor stands or that have been fields with crops such as corn. In that case I add timothy for the same reason I use red clover.

This concludes my yearly cycle. In subsequent articles I will talk about each of these topics in greater detail. 🐏

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