

When Is the “Best” Time for Lambing Season?

—Ulf Kintzel

To say it up front, there is no universally best time for lambing season. When to lamb depends on many specific factors for any given sheep farm, such as markets, winter forage availability, barn space, personal skill set and experience, breed of sheep, climate, and so forth. That means the best time to have lambs can be completely different for one sheep farmer than for another, even if they were to farm next door to each other. However, there is such a thing as a bad time for lambing season, particularly when you are new to sheep farming.

I have experience in lambing for the months of January all the way to May and have some limited experience with summer and fall lambing. I have lambed sheep in the barn, and I have had lambing seasons on pasture. In this article I will lay out why the month of March is my personal best time to have lambs.

The gestation time for sheep is five months, which

means your breeding season will have to start five months (or 145 days) prior to the beginning of your desired lambing season. For a March lambing season, that month would be October. The month of October usually offers very favorable temperatures in the Northeast and New England. It is rarely too warm and rarely too cold. While the cold would not matter much, too much heat can affect the productivity of a ram. In addition, pasture availability is (or at least it should be!) quite high in October. Good pasture allows for the so-called flushing effect to take place, which means that there is a higher ovulation rate when ewes are grazed on good pasture a few weeks prior and throughout the breeding season. A higher ovulation rate in the fall means more twins in the spring.

I don't like the month of March all that much. Around here, a good part of March is muddy. It is difficult or impossible to drive into the pasture when it is muddy to put out hay feeders with round bales. They would need

It is April 16 and a steady and cold rain is coming down all night. For that reason the ewes with their small lambs may spend the night in the barn to dry out.



Photos by Author

to be placed where pugging the pasture is not possible like at the edge of the woods or in a hedgerow. That is of course not a way to strategically put out hay to fertilize the fields. March is also a month with big snowstorms. Lastly, March is a windy month. I really do mind the wind. However, March is no longer nearly as cold as February. Subzero temperatures are of the past. Days with

temperatures just below freezing means the water in the barn will not freeze, where it is just a few degrees higher than outside. That comes in handy when you have buckets with water in the many jugs in the barn. Even if it is a few degrees below

freezing in the barn, it does not negatively affect lambing. Over the years I established five degrees Fahrenheit as the temperature when lambing is still unaffected, when newborn lambs seem to do well, and frozen ear tips and tail tips on newborn lambs don't happen. It can be a lot colder than that in February, but I have not experienced it in the month of March in the 15 years that I am at this new location in western New York. These are all good reasons to spend the month of March in the barn, where it is comfortable, protected from the wind and snow, and where it certainly is not muddy.

Around early April the grass will start growing at my location. In an early spring it may be late March; in a late spring it will certainly start growing during the second week of April. Usually, by the second or third week in April I have enough grazing available to stop feeding hay. By early May I have plenty of grass. I like the early grazing because it reduces the amount and thickness of seed stems. More lush undergrowth will remain well into the summer that way. Critics of early grazing claim it will reduce overall annual yield of forage tonnage. A field trial I am aware of said this is not true, provided that the pasture gets ample rest periods throughout the rest of the growing season and rotational grazing (and not set stock grazing) is practiced. I do exactly that. This means early grazing the way I do it has only upsides and no

downsides.

Another advantage of March lambing is the quality of grass when it starts growing in April and when the lambs start fully eating. A common but very persistent misconception is that early pasture is high in protein but not much else. It is true that it is high in protein, but it is equally high in energy. In addition, it is high in the best

kind of energy: sugars. Since I leave enough residue in the fall and winter, my pasture also doesn't lack fiber when the first grass grows. With every bite of fresh grass, the sheep are "forced" to bite off some residue with it. That provides the necessary

fiber. In addition, I always have a feeder with a hay bale sitting in the pasture during early grazing. It may take a few hundred sheep three days before they finish one round bale, yet this amount of hay is still crucial to providing fiber when it is lacking.

Furthermore, from April to late June, I "kill two birds with one stone." First, I have the highest stocking rate at a time when I reliably have the most grass. Secondly, I have the highest quality pasture at a time when the growing lambs and nursing ewes need it the most. In my view, based on weighing my market lambs that approach harvesting weight, lambs don't grow better and faster than those born in March.

Other management reasons play a role in my choice of a March lambing season as well. Whenever the weather is unfavorable in April, I can run the whole flock back into the barn, sometimes just for the sake of drying up after a cold rain or being spared the misery of spending the night outside in such a cold rain. By that time, the lambs have bonded well with their mothers and are quite willing to move along with their mothers when I move them to the barn with my herding dog. Aside from that, the weather is usually favorable during the time when the lambs are young. It is not too cold anymore and not too hot yet. The flies that could potentially bother them don't emerge until well into July or even August. Running the

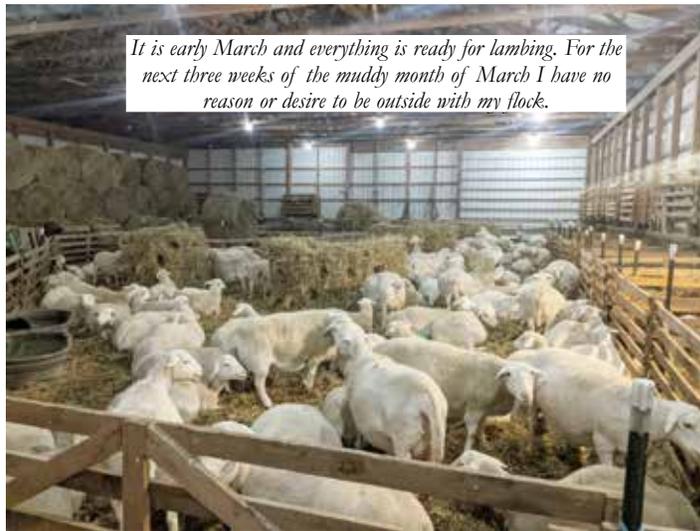


Pasture lambing in the spring can be wonderful – just as long as the weather is nice, you know what you are doing, and there are no complications.

flock through the chute to deworm, vaccinate, and run them through my prophylactic foot bath with a zinc sulfate solution are not restricted yet in planning since it rarely gets too hot yet. In other words, it is an easy time for the lambs. That aids fast growth rates.

Lambing in March means that my very first market lambs will reach 80 to 90 pounds in late June. The breeding stock I am selling—and I am selling a whole lot of it, ram and ewe lambs alike—can be sold at that time as well since they are now from 3 to 3½ months old. The ewes I cull in any given year can be culled at that point; most go into stew and ground meat. That all means I can destock significantly when the grass starts slowing down its growth. By early July, my flock is usually half the size of what it was right after lambing season ended. While we often don't have a real summer slump in growth like midwestern states do, the pasture certainly doesn't grow as fast in July as it does in May.

Pasture lambing has become in vogue these days, possibly as an opposite reaction to the previously promoted winter lambing during the coldest season. Wanting to be in sync with nature is what I hear often from those beginning farmers, who want to do exactly that when they seek my consulting services. I have long learned that a management strategy that fits on a bumper sticker is not one that I want to follow. Sure, pasture lambing can be great when the weather is nice and when you know what you are doing. Experienced ewes tend to separate themselves from the flock and give birth without being crowded by other sheep. Bonding



It is early March and everything is ready for lambing. For the next three weeks of the muddy month of March I have no reason or desire to be outside with my flock.

between ewes and lambs can take place without jugs. No feeding in jugs is necessary. Instead, the ewes can graze on high quality pasture. Pasture lambing can be a charm. However, the weather during the month of April and even in May is not always looking like a Norman Rockwell painting. Are you prepared for bad weather? Do you have shelter when a snowstorm or cold rain

hits? Are you aware how hard it is to move newborn lambs with their protective mothers? Are you prepared for losing lambs in bad weather if you don't have shelter? And are you likewise prepared if neighbors call the authorities when they see unprotected newborn lambs and you have no leg to stand on because the law will not be on your side? Furthermore, are you able to catch a sheep out in the pasture when assistance is needed during lambing, or a sheep has mastitis and needs to be caught and treated for any reason? Likewise, are you prepared to let a ewe and its lambs die when you are unable to catch them to assist? I have more examples of potential difficulties when doing pasture lambing, but I am sure I made my point. Yet, I am not at all advocating against pasture lambing in April and May. Again, it can be great—if you know what you are doing and if you have required a certain skill set and have enough foresight that you don't get caught flat-footed by weather events. Until then, I advise considering the fact that lambing in the barn might be a safer option—at least until you gain the experience to take on a greater challenge in the future.

One afterthought. A very common and almost predictable counterargument that I have heard is this: Deer have their fawns in the spring. They do. And cruel

Another April 16 in a different year. Lambing outside under these conditions can be a challenge and may take expert skills to avoid losses.



and unforgiving mother nature kills a good number of them. That is okay for the deer population. It might put you out of business though if you lose a comparable number of lambs.

Another reason for my March lambing season is the kind of stored forage I am feeding during the winter. I feed exclusively first-cutting hay in round bales. This first-cutting hay is cut early in the season and is highly nutritious. It works well for my sheep during maintenance in the winter, for late pregnancy, and for early milk production. When the lambs start eating significantly and when the ewes have nursed for a longer time, I am already out on pasture. When I used to do winter lambing either in January or February, some of my younger ewes lost more weight until grazing started than I would have liked them to lose. Some of the ewes, younger ones especially, struggled to produce enough milk until grazing started. They all recovered after two or three weeks on grass, and the lambs were able to grow at higher rates at that time, called compensatory growth. Yet not much was gained. My March-born lambs were almost equal to February-born ones, but none was set back. The same is true for the young ewes. To have benefits from winter lambing, the forage needs to be of higher quality than dry hay. You would have to feed haylage and possibly grain. I don't feed either one and

don't intend to.

If you ask yourself by now if I promote March as the only suitable lambing season, my answer will be a resounding NO. I am saying that this is the best month for me for the many reasons I outlined. I am not trying to convince you to have your lambing season in March as well. However, my article can be used as a road map for how to decide when lambing is best for you. Lambing season can be like a beautiful painting on the best of days. From experience, I know most days it is simply hard work and little sleep. It is the time when you can make the most money all year, and it is likewise the time when you can lose your shirt, all depending on how many live lambs are being born and how many or few are being lost. So when you think about when lambing might be best for you, look at it from all angles before you decide. I think I gave you lots of food for thought to do exactly that. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversbeepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversbeepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.

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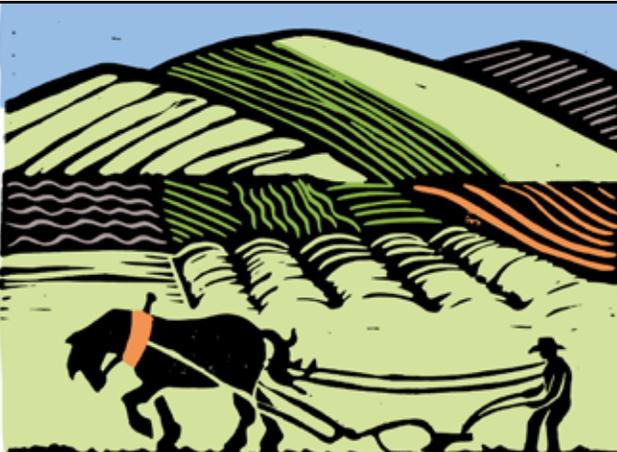
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