



—Ulf Kintzel

Respecting my electric nettings is essential for my farm. The occasional ewe that likes to jump or crawl underneath will not stay for long.

Photos by Author

Culling Sheep

There comes a time when a ewe stops being productive. She needs to be culled and a replacement ewe lamb will take her place. However, there are other reasons that may require culling a ewe before she stops making you money. In this article I will describe the process of culling the way I do it.

Let's do some math first. Don't worry, I will keep it easy and simple. In order to know how many ewes to cull each year and how many ewe lambs to keep in order to maintain the current number, you need to know how many years a ewe is, on average, productive. That number of years is six. Yes, I am aware that a ewe can live longer. Yes, I am aware that there are ewes that will be productive for a few more years than six. The key words in my statement were productive and on average. More about what that means later. First the math I promised.

Let's assume you have a flock of 60 ewes of all possible ages. If you wish to maintain this number, divide the number 60 by the number of average productive years, which is six, and you end up with the number of ewes to be culled. That number is ten. Ten is also the number of ewe lambs you want to keep that year to maintain your flock size. As promised, I kept the math simple.

This calculation does not apply if you wish to change

the size of your flock, but you know now how to calculate it. The math also does not apply if you just started and you have only young ewes. Your need to cull and replace will be much, much lower. Although the number will not be zero.

Back to the six years of productive life on average that I used to start the article. These six years include the animals that die at any given age. They include the ewes that need to be culled because they didn't have a lamb for no justifiable reason. They include the ewe that had mastitis and lost its ability to produce milk in one half of the udder; easy to check because that side will be hard after the mastitis infection is over. These few basic examples show you how quickly the number of possible productive years is brought down to the actual number of productive years. And I have only started to list reasons to cull. It also tells you that in the end you will have a good number of ewes that are older than six years of age and are indeed seven or eight or even nine years old before being culled.

When a ewe has had a very productive life, how do you recognize that she should be culled? In most cases, her front teeth called incisors will start falling out, starting with one of the two central incisors. These teeth are in the lower jaw. The sheep, as a ruminant, does not have upper front teeth. When the teeth start falling out, sheep should be culled if you are doing grass-fed. The situation is different

if you feed grain, especially if you feed a lot of it. Then the fact that front teeth start falling out is far less of an issue and your ewe may be productive for a few more years. When do the front teeth start falling out? That very much depends on what the sheep graze. The shorter they have to graze, the sooner the teeth are worn and start falling out. Picking up sand, dirt, and gravel speeds up the process. The longer and lusher the pasture is, the longer the teeth are and the longer they last. I expect teeth to fall out at about eight years of age.

Being grass-fed is harder on a ewe than when you are feeding grain. Grain feeding allows for less up and down in body condition. When the ewe raises twins and is on forage only, she then needs time to recover. That shortens the time a ewe will be productive. Grass-fed also means the ewe depends a lot more on her teeth. I missed a few last year whose front teeth started falling out and I paid dearly for it after winter lambing when spring didn't want to arrive until May. Some of the ewes with missing teeth lost too much body condition, which in turn affected their milk production greatly.

Thus far I have listed reasons for which you must cull. Now I start to discuss the reasons why you want to cull. There are so many more of those. When I discuss these, know that it will be a matter of choice. You won't be able to cull for all the reasons every year that I am about to mention. You will have to decide what your priorities are.

If you have problem sheep, they should be high on your list to be culled, no matter how big they are and no matter how productive they are. What is a problem sheep? It is a sheep that has a reoccurring problem that no other sheep in your flock seems to have and that occupies quite a bit of your time. Such sheep could be a particularly wild one, while the rest are calm. She ought to go. Such sheep could be an escape artist that jumps panels or goes under fences while the rest don't. She ought to go. It could be a sheep that keeps challenging your herding dog while the rest fall in line. She ought to go. Rule of thumb is this: When you go inside for supper and keep telling your spouse about the same sheep that spoiled your day, it is time for that sheep to go. (Likewise, if you go inside for supper and keep complaining about the fact that the sheep spoiled your day, raising sheep



Ewe With Twins Cradling: This ewe cradles her two young lambs. Good mothering is important. Ewes lacking it should be culled.

might not be for you. But that is an entirely different story.) Structural soundness matters as well. If you have a sheep, for instance, with a pronounced dipping back or weak pasterns, you may want to cull her. These few examples are the simple ones. They are often individual sheep that need to be culled. In the following paragraph I will discuss how to select for traits. That is more complicated.

I have had my flock for 23 years now. It started out with whatever ewe I could buy cheaply because I had just arrived from Germany without any financial means, pursuing the American dream. This collection of sheep was then upgraded to a purebred flock of Texel sheep, which did well for me for many years. I then upgraded to a purebred flock of White Dorper sheep once I was able to afford

rams of this breed that had newly arrived in the U.S. and at first had been totally overpriced. When I upgraded to a flock of Texel sheep, I initially noticed a lack of mothering ability in some ewes. That specifically manifested itself when I picked up the lambs when lambing on pasture and attempted to load the ewe with her lambs in the trailer and drive her to the barn. Quite a few wouldn't follow. That was unacceptable to me. I rigorously culled all adult ewes that didn't have good mothering instinct. It is a big time factor too. When a ewe doesn't follow her lambs when you pick them up, no matter what your reasons are for doing so, you spend a lot of time with these sheep. That is often time that I don't have during lambing season. In addition, it tests your patience. Careful though that you are actually culling for genetic shortcomings in mothering ability. A young ewe that lambs for the first time may experience a lot of pain and may indeed at first walk away from her lamb. Cut her some slack; it may not be genetics at all. Sometimes they are a little nervous or confused. Don't jump the gun with such a young ewe and cull her. Wait a while and see what happens next year. Also keep in mind that ewes that lamb and did not receive the necessary nutrition before lambing may walk away from their lambs and fight for their own lives. That is not a lack of mothering instinct!

Lambing season is when a sheep farmer makes or loses money. Ease of lambing helps the sheep farmer to make money. Lack of ease of lambing is a reason to cull and should be high on anyone's list. If a lamb is perfectly well

positioned, but the ewe cannot get it out on time and get it out alive or needs help, she should be culled. Exceptions are lambs that aren't positioned correctly. If the head, for instance, is turned back, the ewe cannot possibly get the lamb out, let alone get it out alive. There are a few other positions that are not favorable to allow for easy delivery. That has nothing to do with the ewe's genetics. Also, young sheep lambing at 12 or 13 or 14 months may have on occasion a problem lambing, but will do fine in subsequent years. I don't cull a ewe too quickly for being unable to deliver a lamb without help. I want to see a pattern before I do. Since I keep records I can identify sheep that have continued problems lambing. In fact, I have basically already managed to rid myself of such ewes.

Another good reason to cull is for parasite resistance. Parasite resistance means that I select for sheep that can to a degree tolerate the barber pole worm, the number one killer among sheep parasites. It does not mean that these sheep are immune to the parasite and don't get it. That also means that any resistant sheep is still subject to being killed by these worms, if the management system is not appropriate, i.e. continued close grazing in a set-stock operation. "Selecting for parasite resistance" —you may have read this fancy phrase here and there. What does that mean? It is actually quite simple. You keep culling the adult ewes that keep

showing signs of parasites at those times when others don't, i.e. after deworming. Careful though, there are times when all sheep may be affected. For instance, right after lambing the immune system of the ewe basically collapses and all ewes lose a lot or all of their resistance to parasites. Likewise, resistance builds over time. Young ewes may still show signs of being affected because they haven't built up resistance yet. Cut them some slack. Evaluate your adult and well-fed ewes and identify those that show signs time and again that the barber pole worm is affecting them by being anemic or showing a bottle jaw while the others don't.

While I don't have hoof rot and never had it in my flock, I did have lots of experience with it when I worked for more than a decade as a shepherd in Germany prior to my arrival in the U.S. My advice is to try to avoid getting it in the first place if you can. But if you already have it and have tried to eradicate it, know this: Some sheep are more susceptible than others. Time and again I have heard the story that just when they thought they had gotten rid of it, it started again. Likely, it was the same sheep that started the outbreak again. Identify them and cull them no matter how productive they are!

Another specific reason for me to cull is the ability to shed. This may not apply to most of you, but those who have hair sheep might care to hear what I have to say.



Shedding is not fully understood. Initially, I thought all I have to do is breed a ewe that sheds to a ram that sheds and I have lambs that shed. It is not quite that simple. It's more complicated. To make matters worse, I had sheep from time to time that shed fully in some years but not in others. The fact is that body condition affects shedding ability, and I have young sheep that have a couple of lambs when they are 13 months old that don't shed well that year but do so in a subsequent year. Yet, even though I have been using fully shedding rams since 2005, I still have a ewe from time to time that does not shed as well as desired for no apparent reason. I cull them and have done so for years now. While I claim having a fully shedding flock, such an animal pops up now and then and needs to be culled as well. I figured I do the best I can by using fully shedding rams and by culling those that don't shed fully in year two or three. (That is because shedding ability improves in year two over year one.) I also offer a return policy when I sell breeding stock for animals that do not shed satisfactorily. In turn, I have given up trying to fully understand how shedding in sheep works. I feel I do my part and have enough other things on my mind. Besides, I don't need to know everything. Nobody likes a know-it-all, right?

On occasion, I have had a customer remarking that the hooves of one or some of the sheep they purchased from me was overgrown and needed trimming. In fact, it was a big deal to some of them. It baffled me. I suggested to just trim the hooves, which was seen as a flip reply. I was baffled again. It led me to state to many customers that White Dorpers with their white hooves have more hoof growth than some sheep breeds with darker hooves. If you don't intend to cut or trim hooves at times, you don't want to get White Dorper sheep. Truth be told, I have let a sale go now and then when the buyer insisted he or she will never cut any hooves. What is also true, however, is the fact that some breeders of this breed who sell stud rams have neglected selecting for correct hooves, which is different than the rate of growth. Some still do neglect it. I am fortunate enough to deal with a breeder in Oregon who is addressing this issue and culls otherwise perfectly good stud rams when the hooves are not correct. It is Lewis White Dorpers and I have been using their rams for several years now and intend to get more from them in the near future. Last year I started culling for hoof structure as well. Why did I not do this earlier? Well, look at the list above of more pressing reasons to cull and traits that I needed to select for. That's why. Now that I have all the above, I can focus on hooves. As I mentioned before, you will have to make choices and decide what reasons you choose to cull in addition to the necessary reasons to cull such as old age or mastitis. If you choose all reasons at once, you will cull way too many ewes, which is not likely to be sustainable.

Perhaps you have noticed that I left out culling ewes with lack of twinning rate. That is because in most cases the

lack of twins is a management problem and not a fertility problem, genetically speaking. If your twinning rate is unsatisfactory, look first for ways to up your management rather than looking for a breed or ram that you hope will fix your problem. Yes, I keep mostly twin-born lambs. Yet, I don't exclude a single lamb that I know comes from a good mother line and the ewe is either too young to have twins or has had twins before. Besides, the ability to twin has very low heritability. Also, selecting solely for twinning rate bears the risk of selecting against other good traits such as growth rate. That means that having a single lamb is no longer a reason for me to cull a ewe. While anecdotal and not at all empirical, I want to share this story: Years ago, I had a wonderful ewe. She was large, she was calm, she was a clean shedder. Year one she had one lamb when she was 13 months old that she raised beautifully. The same happened the next year, and then again the year after. I told her that I would cull her the next year if she has just one lamb again. She delivered triplets the year after and raised all of them. It seems she didn't read the book about genetics! 🐑

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

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