

Ewes for Market Lamb Production



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If you are thinking about going into the sheep business, there are two very important areas to consider. Each requires thinking and planning. These are 1) the mating (breeding) plan and 2) the feeding plan. The first of these is the subject of this fact sheet. The second involves the pasture and feeding plan and will be discussed in a separate fact sheet.

The Mating Plan

If you want to have the most productive flock for production of lamb and wool, you will want to crossbreed. By doing this, you can combine breeds in ways to take advantage of the strong points of certain breeds and also get the increased reproductive rate, livability and growth rate that results from crossbreeding. The first consideration of breeding concerns the breed makeup of the ewe flock. The breeding of the flock determines its potential and the breeding of the females (ewes) determines the success of the reproductive phase of the enterprise much more than does the breeding of the males. The ewes determine or strongly influence:

- When mating occurs
- Ovulation rate
- Embryonic mortality
- Lambing difficulty
- Early lamb losses

Crossbred ewes tend to become sexually mature at younger ages, conceive more readily, produce more lambs and give more milk. Therefore, when two well-adapted breeds are available and crossed, highly productive crossbred ewes result. Such ewes mated to highly fertile rams will produce growthy lambs that yield good carcasses. This should be the aim of sheepmen in selecting breeds of sheep to use in a crossbreeding program. The question then becomes how to use the available breeds most advantageously.

Breeds Available

When you think about starting a ewe flock, consider availability of the different kinds of ewes. In Oklahoma the breeds used commercially are **Rambouillet** (most of

the whitefaced ewes from west Texas, often called Westerns), **Dorset**, **Suffolk** and **Hampshire**. The only breed available in large numbers is the **Rambouillet**. The other breeds are mostly found in purebred flocks, and females are usually too scarce and expensive to use for commercial production.

Breed Characterization

The **Rambouillets** (from Texas) are certainly a satisfactory breed with which to start a crossbreeding program. They are medium to large in size, shear a valuable, high-quality fleece and have a long breeding season (May through December). They mature slowly, however and produce only a fair number of twins.

Dorsets are small to medium in size, shear a dry, light fleece, have a long breeding season and produce more twins than do **Rambouillets**. They tend to fatten at lighter weights than normally marketed lambs and the ewes are not as long lived as the **Rambouillets**.

Dorset rams mated to **Rambouillet** ewes produce the best kind of crossbred ewe for Oklahoma if you wish lambs during the fall and if the ewes are going to be fed and managed for maximum production. These crossbred ewes are medium in size, breed readily in May and June, lamb easily and are good mothers. Under fall lambing conditions, they produce about 20 percent more lambs than Western ewes. Such ewes bred to blackfaced rams (**Hampshire** or **Suffolk**) produce fast-growing lambs that produce excellent carcasses and can be sold satisfactorily at market weights of 100 to 115 pounds.

Suffolks are the largest of the four breeds named. The ewes breed fairly well from July until December, produce many twins and give plenty of milk. They shear a light fleece, however and are so large in size that one must get a high level of production from them to pay the feed bill. The principal use of **Suffolks** in the U.S. is to furnish rams to produce crossbred market lambs. Some **Suffolk**-Western crossbred ewes are used, however. They lamb readily in January and are generally good ewes if one wants January-February lambs. Such ewes should probably be bred to **Hampshire** rams.

Hampshires are a fairly large breed that also produce many rams to be used for the production of market lambs. Their crossbred lambs gain about as well as **Suffolk**-sired lambs and produce excellent carcasses.

Recommendation

Research at the Southwest Livestock and Forage Research Center (Ft. Reno) indicates that the best breed and mating combination involves mating Dorset rams to Rambouillet ewes (Westerns from west Texas) to produce Dorset X Rambouillet ewes. These ewes mated to blackfaced rams (Hampshire, Suffolk or Hampshire X Suffolk crossbreds) make the best combination for maximum lamb and wool production under most Oklahoma conditions. Research indicates that the crossbred blackfaced rams may excel when breeding during late spring or when using young rams.

Source of Dorset X Rambouillet Ewes

These crossbred ewes are usually not available for purchase and sheepmen must usually produce them. This suggests that anyone going into the sheep business or expanding his ewe flock needs to get a source of good Rambouillet ewes in order to produce the crossbred ewes.

How can you obtain Rambouillet ewes? The Edwards Plateau area of Texas still has a large population of Rambouillet sheep. Many ranches in this area have excellent Rambouillets.

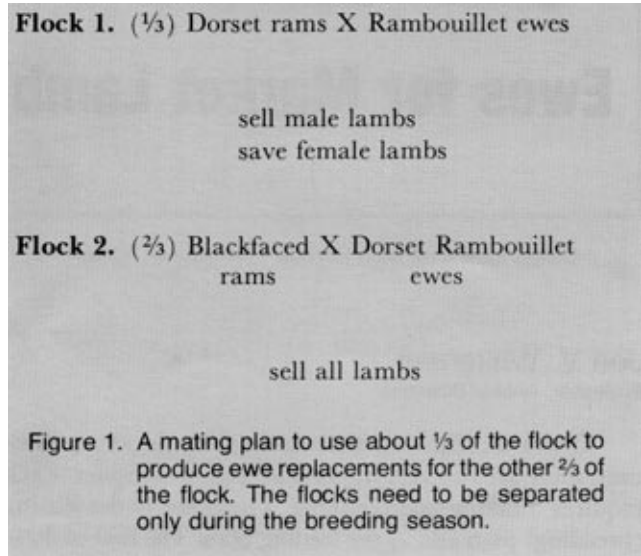
What classes of Rambouillet females are available and when are they available?

Yearlings

Many ewe lambs are wintered on the ranches. At shearing time in the spring, the rancher selects those yearlings that he wants for replacements and the remainder are for sale. This usually occurs sometime in March or April. These shorn yearlings usually cost about what fat lambs bring at 100 pounds. These ewes can be used for 7-9 years and can produce crossbred ewes each year. One hundred Rambouillet ewes used in this manner can furnish enough replacements for a two hundred head flock of crossbred ewes (figure 1.).

Six-Year-Old Ewes

Many ranchers in Texas only keep their ewes for five productive years. After their fifth lambing (as six-year-olds), ewes are considered too old for harsh range conditions and are sold. Most of these ewes are sound enough for at least two more years under more favorable feed conditions on farms. These ewes are usually available during the summer and cost about one-third as much as a fat lamb is worth. During dry years, some of these ewes would be available as early as June. During wet years they would be more available during July and August. Such ewes should be bred immediately to Dorset rams. Lambs from this first mating should be weaned by late April and the ewes mated again beginning about May 15. If this plan is followed and all sound Dorset X Rambouillet ewe lambs saved as replacements, you can raise as many good



crossbred ewes in two matings as there were six-year-old ewes purchased. The old ewes can then be sold for about as much as they cost if they are in good condition. This plan produces a flock of crossbred ewes of similar ages that can be used for a lifetime (8-9 years) but must usually be replaced by producing new Dorset X Rambouillet ewes in the same or some other manner.

Ewes for Small Flocks

Sheep producers in Eastern Oklahoma, especially, but in some other areas also may not prefer to use Rambouillet or Dorset Rambouillet crossbred ewes for one reason or another. Rambouillet sheep are susceptible to footrot and not recommended for areas where the ground is wet much of the time. They also suffer from high humidity.

Flocks composed of grade Dorsets, Suffolks or Hampshires can be quite productive. Also if producers want to crossbreed to increase productivity, it will work with these breeds. A two-breed rotation works well in small flocks and results in about two-thirds of the total possible benefits of heterosis. One starts with one breed of ewes and crosses them continuously with rams from the other desired breed saving ewe replacements from the most productive ewes. After 7 or 8 years when all of the original ewes are gone, the breeding of the flock will be one-half or more the blood of the breed of rams that has been used. At this time switch breeds of rams back to breed that the ewes were originally. Such a system based on any two well adapted, productive breeds will improve total flock productivity and permit producers to improve their flock over time by saving daughters of their most productive ewes as flock replacements.