



CHOOSING SHEEP FOR YOUR OPERATION

When choosing breeding stock for your flock, the first question you need to ask yourself is “What do I want to do with my sheep?” Are you looking to produce meat, fibre, or both? The second thing to consider is the resources you have available to you, including barn space, pasture, and options for stored feed. In Nova Scotia, grain prices are comparatively high to other parts of Canada so you may consider looking for sheep that perform well on forage-based diets. Are you planning to pasture your sheep or will you keep your sheep exclusively indoors? Do you want a lamb crop once a year, or more than once a year?

If you have access to land, it may be worthwhile looking for hardy sheep that do well on pasture. It will always be cheaper for sheep to graze pasture. One caveat of pasturing sheep is parasite management. Some breeds are naturally more resistant to parasites but it is a problem which requires good management to mitigate the problem.



What production system are you interested in? Different sheep breeds are suited for different purposes.

Popular Breeds of Commercial Sheep in Nova Scotia

Popular breeds of sheep in Nova Scotia include Dorsets, Rideau Arcotts, Suffolks, Romanovs, and North Country Cheviots, and various crosses of each. Crossbred, or commercial, flocks generally have a genetic advantage over purebred sheep known as hybrid vigour. For market lamb operations, it is desirable to have multiple lambs born to a ewe at once. Commercial ewes should be expected to rear 2-3 lambs without difficulty per parturition. Research from the University of Guelph Ridgetown campus confirmed that although triplets tend to have lower weaning weights than twins, and it is more expensive to feed ewes with triplets, it is more profitable to rear triplets to market weight compared to twins.

Polled Dorsets: a maternal breed popular for their prolificacy, ability to breed out of season, and mothering ability. Dorsets also produce a fine, dense, springy wool.

Rideau Arcotts: a Canadian breed developed in Ottawa for the Canadian climate. Like Dorsets, they are known for multiple births, ability to breed out of season, and mothering ability. They grow well. Dorset x Rideau Arcott crosses are popular in the province and across the country.

Suffolks: a popular terminal sire breed. Suffolks are a large breed of sheep that have excellent carcass traits.

North Country Cheviot: a hardy breed of sheep originally from Scotland and northern England. They can do well on pasture-based systems and poorer quality forage. They have an excellent mothering ability, good carcass quality and average rate of gain.

Romanov: an extremely prolific medium-sized breed of sheep prized for their ability to have multiple births. Their dark wool is not as valuable as white wool as it will not hold dye.



A Suffolk cross. Suffolks are a large terminal breed known for their carcass qualities.

Maternal breeds prize qualities that make good mothers, including mothering ability, prolificacy, ability to breed out of season, and milk production. Sheep are seasonally estrus, meaning that they naturally breed in the fall to lamb once in the spring. Some breeds of sheep, including Dorsets and Rideau Arcotts, are known as long-season breeders that can be bred out of season with proper management and excellent nutrition. This is a requirement for an accelerated lambing program. Terminal breeds favour growth, carcass quality and development, and feed efficiency.

Various traits from different breeds can be taken advantage of by crosses. A two-way cross involves purebred ewes from maternal breeds being bred to a terminal sire. A three-way cross would be crossbred maternal ewes, demonstrating hybrid vigour, being bred to a terminal sire breed. That way, the ewes hopefully produce multiple lambs with little effort and care for them well. The lambs carry genetics from the sire that helps them grow quickly and finish well.

Where to Source Livestock

Breeding stock can be sourced directly from farms or at livestock auctions. The preferable location is to buy seedstock directly from a farm to reduce transportation stress and reduce the chances of picking up illnesses. Be careful you are not buying someone's culls. Look for sheep from a high-health status flock, and purchase from as few sources as possible. Any new sheep should be quarantined from any existing sheep for 30 days, at a distance of at least 30 metres. Breeding stock can be purchased as lambs, as open ewes, or as bred ewes. Try to find a producer with a production system similar to what you have or want to achieve. If you are going to keep your sheep on pasture, look for sheep from a system that does the same. Look at all their sheep, not just ones for sale, and notice their condition and structure.



Buying a group of animals directly from a farm is a preferable option.



Sheep can also be purchased at auctions, with care.

Be mindful about the nutrition of ewe lambs when you are buying and feeding them. Ideally, any ewe lambs you are considering buying should be housed and fed separately from market lambs although this is infrequently practised. Slow and steady growth should be the goal for replacements. Too much energy or fat will increase the amount of fat tissue in the udder, which will reduce the amount of milk they can produce in the future.

Rams should be chosen with care as well. Rams represent half the genetics of your lamb crop so it is worth investing in good ones that will complement your ewes. Rams can be purchased as ram lambs or as proven rams; each have their advantage. Ram lambs will not supply the ram power of an experienced ram but are less likely to have diseases that can be introduced to your ewes. The opposite is true for proven sires. Rams can also be leased or borrowed if you have a trustworthy source.

How to choose animals

If you are a new or inexperienced shepherd, you may wish to ask the farm you are buying from to choose some sheep for you or bring along someone more experienced. Ask for performance data, but don't forget to look at the conformation of the sheep in question. As it applies to your desired operation, ask about lambing percentages, lambing ease, number of lambs raised, weaning weights, market weights, and weighing dates to calculate rate of gain. It can be hard, if not impossible, to correctly judge the quality of animals if a producer does not keep performance data.

Check that the ewes have a correct bite pattern. An under- or over-bite may affect her ability to eat as she gets older. Teeth should line up correctly with the dental pad. Animals should have straight backs, legs set squarely beneath them, and fleeces that are not patchy or broken. Animals that will be used in a meat production system should look solid and well-muscled. By keeping these details in mind and doing due diligence when choosing livestock, you should be successful in purchasing a healthy, sound and productive flock.