

FLEECE IS A YEAR LONG PROJECT

by Sarabeth Parido

A quality wool fleece starts long before shearing. Wool production is a year-round process. Proper harvesting techniques are important, but it relies on good nutrition and care.

A large part of raising wool animals is knowing what to feed sheep in order to obtain good quality wool. Grazing pasture of good quality hay, supplemented with a concentrate grain mixture, along with water, vitamins, and minerals are needed by sheep. The same applies to other wool producing ruminant animals, such as angora goats, llamas and alpacas.

Feeding choices will vary from place to place. Producers who have large acreage will raise sheep differently than the small property owner. All animals require nutrients including protein, carbohydrate, fats, water, vitamins and minerals. Sheep will be getting these nutrients largely from eating plants, primarily grass pasture or hay. The growth of the wool doesn't take a large increase in nutrients but the quality of the nutrients does make a difference in the quality of the wool. Producers will save themselves time, effort and headache by controlling the contamination of fleeces with pasture care. Open pasture will keep the wool the cleanest. Feeders which keep hay and chaff off the backs of sheep should be used. Hay should not be carried or thrown over the sheep. Most belly and neck wool is discarded in the skirting process, but with more care to feeding techniques, more wool can be saved.

Pasture should be the main source of nutrition for sheep. If pasture is not available, a good quality hay can be supplemented. Hay quality is variable and very weather dependent. Adding small amounts of legume supplement cubes, soybeans, and sunflower seeds will increase the protein intake. You will harvest a better quality of wool if you pay attention

NUTRIENT REQUIREMENTS OF EWES & DOES

MAINTENANCE - Dry Does and Ewes - First 15 Weeks of Gestation

Pounds of daily dry matter needed by weight (weight of doe/ewe when dry and open)	% Protein	% TDN	Examples of diets that meet requirements
110 lbs. - 2.2 lbs. per day	8-10%	55%	Most medium quality grass pastures and grass hays.
130 lbs. - 2.4 lbs. per day			
155 lbs. - 2.6 lbs. per day			
175 lbs. - 3.0 lbs. per day			

GESTATION - Last 4 Weeks, 180-225% Lambing / Kidding Rate Expected

Pounds of daily dry matter needed by weight (weight of doe/ewe when dry and open)	% Protein	% TDN	Examples of diets that meet requirements
110 lbs. - 3.7 lbs. per day	11-12%	66%	High quality grass or medium quality legume hay or pasture supplemented with a 0.5 to 1.5 lbs of shelled corn or other concentrate (needed to meet high TDN requirements of late gestation females).
130 lbs. - 4.0 lbs. per day			
155 lbs. - 4.2 lbs. per day			
175 lbs. - 4.4 lbs. per day			

LACTATION - First 6-8 Weeks, Nursing Twins

Pounds of daily dry matter needed by weight	% Protein	% TDN	Examples of diets that meet requirements
110 lbs. - 5.3 lbs. per day	15-16%	65%	High quality grass or medium quality legume hay or pasture supplemented with a 2-3lb/head/day (average) 16% to 18% protein concentrate mix or high quality legume hay supplemented with shelled corn or other concentrate.
130 lbs. - 5.7 lbs. per day			
155 lbs. - 6.2 lbs. per day			
175 lbs. - 6.6 lbs. per day			

to the quality of the protein being fed to the sheep. Especially watch the protein intake of your pregnant ewes as they will need more protein as they develop their lambs, maintain their bodies and produce wool. Quality nutrition, pasture, feed and mineral will show up in the fleece. Breakage or tender spots in the fleece usually mean nutritional deficits or stress in the sheep at a specific time.

Pasture and barn management are very important to keep contaminants out of your fleeces. Pastures should be monitored for burr and thistle producing plants which will literally be a pain to remove from the fleece. It is not uncommon for sheep who have access to heavily wooded pastures to see whole tree branches imbedded into their wool which can cause distress and discomfort to your

animals. Animals with high quality wool can be protected with coats. Whenever possible, sawdust or wood shavings should be avoided as the sole type of bedding as it will stick into the wool.

A good wool harvest is a year long process and more effort from the producer during the year will make a big difference in the harvesting of your wool during shearing time. A clean, high quality fleece means more profit for your farm and a better value added commodity to offer.

Sarabeth Parido, is the Director of the Kentucky Sheep and Fiber Festival and The Kentucky Fiber Trail. She raises her own small flock of sheep in CLark County, Kentucky along with her husband and four sons.