



BUYER'S GUIDE to Selecting Replacement Females

By Ricky Skillington

I hear lots of sheep and goat producers say “I think I am just going to get out of the business. I just can’t seem to make any profit from raising these animals. I go and sit at the local sale barn and buy the best looking females that come through the barn and pay more for them than anyone else. Then when I get them home, the lambs and/or kids they raise are just sorry. Heck, most of the time, I either lose them or they won’t breed.”

I cringe when I hear producers talk like this, then try to make them understand that in most cases, the animals that are being sold at the weekly auction barn are there for a reason. That reason is usually that they didn’t work in their owner’s breeding program. They have just gone out and bought someone else’s problems.

In most cases, small ruminant producers understand that the ram is one half of the entire lamb/kid crop. This is very true, but the females that are being used make up the other half of the crop and more than likely, will be the foundation for the future of any operation. Small ruminant producers need to make sure that this foundation is solid. They need to realize that the necessary genetics for the small ruminant operation needs to be there to produce profits in the future. Producers must do lots of “homework” and planning before they even begin to start looking for replacement females.

The first thing that I recommend to a producer who is looking for high quality replacement females is see what is available in their area. Look for a producer who has some history in small ruminant production. If they have been



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raising sheep/goats for a while, they are doing something right and usually that means that they are pretty good at producing females that work. I also recommend that the potential buyer look at operations that have between 40 females and 150 females in their operation; even more if they are looking at registered. By looking at operations of this size, there should be enough good females available for potential buyers to find enough half-sisters to provide a similar genetic base to build toward the future.

If you can’t find any in your area or you would like to move to an area different from yours to search for some new genetics, this can be done pretty

easily. Go to industry magazines, breed association web sites or simply ask other breeders in your area that you trust, whom they would suggest. I don’t recommend any producer pick up a breed magazine and look at whom is just winning the shows now. Using show ring as a measuring stick for future production has doomed many good commercial producers, especially those who are considering moving into the registered business. Look for herds and flocks that have been established for some time. These are the ones who usually have replacement stock for sale or if they don’t, they can recommend someone who does. While I don’t recommend “word of mouth” in production practices, I do in selection of replacement animals. No matter the specie of animal, there are those who have sold or will sell animals that are less than quality for more money than they are worth. Usually, the reputation of these producers will follow them and the word will get out about these folks. If you are looking for registered animals, try to find a producer who has several years in the registered business. Ask questions as to whom they have sold replacement animals in the past and talk to those folks. If they are in the business to sell replacement females, they will gladly give you the names of people who have bought their animals. Be prepared to spend some money and let the producer from whom you are buying know that if these work out for you, you will be back to purchase more. Getting a flock/herd of females with similar genetics will help

produce a lamb/kid crop that is similar in quality for the owner to sell.

Secondly, ask to see the producer's records. If they have none or won't let you see them, then thank them for their time and LEAVE! Any small ruminant producer "worth their salt" will have some records. Now these records may not be the neatest or written from a computer program, and they will more than likely be written out on paper, but they will be something.

I strongly encourage potential buyers to request a Codon 171 test on any replacement ewes they are considering for purchase. This will help the buyer better understand the chances of them having to deal with Scrapie in their sheep flock. Most producers are fully aware of what can happen to a flock or herd that has been diagnosed with Scrapie, so I won't waste time dealing with that subject.

Finally, the question always comes up, what are replacement animals worth? That is a question that I get all the time. I usually tell producers that it depends on how long they plan on being in the business and the ready capital that they have to purchase these replacement animals. As a general rule, I recommend that commercial producers plan on spending at least three to five times the value of the most expensive animal that they sold last season. If the producer wants a better animal, they may have to spend up to ten times the value of this animal. How I came up with this figure is that a producer can recoup what they spent on the replacement in two to three lamb/kid crops figuring a 1.5% crop. If you are looking to get into the registered business, once again use the breed/industry magazine to see what quality animals are bringing at sales. While you might be able to buy a quality animal for a cheap price, the old saying, "You get what you pay for" is usually true in buying replacement animals.

Ricky Skillington, is the "First Responder" for Small Ruminant Production with the University of Tennessee Extension. He is also the County Director for the Marshall County Extension Service and he and his family raised and exhibited registered Southdown sheep throughout the South before dispersing his flock. He is currently judging breeding sheep shows throughout the South.

ASK THE EXPERT

What are your top tips for people purchasing replacement females?

**Kathy Meyer, Final Frontier Farm, Paris, KY-
Commercial Sheep Producer**

Kathy Meyer and her husband Tony own Final Frontier Farm, located in Paris, KY. They manage 140 Texel crossbred spring lambing ewes in a companion grazing system with 45 Angus crossbred fall calving cows.

1. Buying replacement ewes is serious business and much effort should be put into knowing as much about those ewes as possible. Ask permission to visit the farm during lambing or at a time when the shepherd may have all the sheep together, like at weaning. More information is always better and that relationship is how you are assured you are getting the correct information. I want prospective buyers to study the lambing records for the females or in the case of ewe lambs, buyers are shown the lambing records of their dams.
2. It is my practice to encourage new shepherds to let me manage as much "wrong" out of the ewes, especially ewe lambs, as I can before they take them home. Raising ewe lambs on pasture and feeding them enough to make them grow, but not so much that they are too heavily conditioned, takes a little more observation than a new producer may possess.

**Denise Martin, Martin Meadow Farms, Magnolia, KY-
Commercial Goat Producer**

Denise Martin and her husband, Brian, have been raising meat goats for 15 years. Denise sells several value added meat goat products such as jerky sticks, bacon and summer sausage.

1. Be sure the female has a good udder! Without a good udder, you will have sorry kids because she won't be able to feed them. A "good" udder is clean and has 2 teats with no spurs or hooks. I will accept a four teated doe only if the teats are separate and clean.
2. Must have good sturdy feet and legs. If the doe can't support her pregnant weight, she will break down and cull herself out of the herd.
3. Must have a good set of teeth that properly aligned so that she can eat easily and get the most out of her feed.
4. Know if the doe is a twin or a triplet, and how long her mother has been in production. I want to get the longest production time out of my goats, and I cull goats that just produce singles. For my business model, the surest way to make money is to have multiple births by does that can have longevity in the herd.
5. Now using this criteria, will I know any of this information on the does running across the scales at my local stockyard? Most likely no! I will know nothing about them except most likely they were someone else's problem does!