

Producing Early Lambs

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Production of market lambs falls in two general categories: early lambs and late lambs. This guide deals only with early lambs—those born before March 1 and sold before July 1.

Advantages

- Lambs marketed April through June usually bring more than those marketed July through September.
- Ewes lamb during January and February when more labor is usually available.
- Lambs are marketed before hot weather sets in. Finishing lambs for market during hot weather is difficult.
- Lambs are marketed before internal parasites become too severe. Warm weather and moisture are ideal for a parasite buildup.

Disadvantages

- Early lamb production will require:
 - Greater amounts of concentrates and harvested roughage for winter feeding;
 - Dry shelter, without drafts, and supplementary heat;
 - More skill to lamb and rear lambs—settling all ewes in August and September is difficult.

12 Steps to Profit With Early Lambs

1. Select Productive Breeding Stock. Large-framed ewes produce more lambs and suckle them more satisfactorily than small ewes. Northwest, Native, and Texas ewes that are big, sound, and healthy should produce good lambs. Sound mouths and udders are essential.

Crossbred ewes are more prolific than purebred ewes. Getting ewes settled for early lambs is easier if the ewes are part Rambouillet or Dorset. Good fleece adds to returns.

The ram is half the flock. Select a big growthy ram that has adequate frame and scale. Check production records and select for rate and efficiency of gain. Select a ram from the mutton breeds.

2. Breed August 1 Through September. Flush ewes on good pasture 3 to 4 weeks before breeding begins. Use good lespedeza, bluegrass, or small grain pasture for conditioning ewes. Avoid ladino or white clover during breeding season.

Shear ram two weeks before turning with ewes. Leave a patch of wool on his brisket to absorb marking fluid. Turn ram with ewes August 1. If the ram is thin, feed him daily a pound or more of a mixture such as six parts corn, three parts bran, and one part of soybean oil meal.

Figure 25 to 30 ewes to a well matured ram and 15 to a well developed ram lamb.

3. Check Ram's Fertility and Obtain Breeding Dates.

Paint the ram's brisket daily with a mixture of pigment and cylinder oil to mark ewes which have been bred. You can make an inexpensive swab for painting the brisket with a piece of burlap wrapped around a short length of broom handle. Change the color of the pigment in 15 days and observe ewes which are bred the second time. Satisfactory pigments are yellow ochre, Venetian red, and lamp black, used in that order. Changing color will give an indication of ram's fertility. If most ewes come in heat more than twice, the ram is probably infertile. Ewes may be numbered with a special branding paint, and numbers can be recorded as ewes are bred. Use big numbers (four inches) applied to the upper side where they can be seen easily.

4. Cut Feed Costs With Good Pasture and Roughage.

Seed small grain for fall and spring pasture. Save bluegrass and fescue for winter pasture. Use fescue and small grain for spring pasture; bluegrass and other grasses, such as redtop and timothy, for late spring; and lespedeza or other legumes for summer and early fall grazing.

Fine-stemmed leafy legume hay is the best roughage for pregnant ewes. Corn silage may replace part or all of the legume hay. High quality corn silage plus soybean, cottonseed, or linseed oil meal makes a satisfactory ration for wintering ewes. Grass hays properly supplemented with protein concentrate are also satisfactory.

5. Avoid Lambing Difficulties by Managing Ewes Well.

Pregnant ewes should usually gain 15 to 30 pounds from breeding to lambing. Ewes with prominent backbones and bare ribs are too thin and need more feed. If good legume hay is available, feed it with ½ to 1 pound per head daily of a grain mixture of six parts corn, three parts oats or bran, and one part oil meal or a similar mixture.

If good legume hay is not available, feed 0.4 to 0.5 pound oil meal per head daily plus ½ to 1 pound of a grain mixture of two parts corn and one part oats or bran. If these are not available, feed 1½ to 2 ears of corn per ewe on pasture and feed oil meal in troughs.

Always provide a mineral mixture of equal parts salt and steamed bone meal or the equivalent for ewes.

Provide exercise during the winter; feeding hay some distance from the barn helps. Furnish plenty of clean water at all times. Ewes will not drink enough if water is near freezing.

Three to four weeks before lambing, crotch out ewes and remove wool from faces; also, trim feet of ewes.

6. Reduce Labor Costs and Increase Efficiency With Buildings and Equipment. Housing for pregnant ewes need not be expensive. A dry, well ventilated shelter open to the south is adequate for wintering ewes.

Lambing pens that measure 3 or 4 by 4 feet will pay for themselves in saved lambs and will prevent disowned lambs. Ewes in labor should be in a roomy maternity pen; then move ewes and offspring to a lambing pen.

Make special preparations for caring for chilled lambs born during severe weather. Heat lamps will prevent chilled lambs. Follow safety precautions in using heat lamps.

7. Increase Profit by Saving Lambs. The gestation period is approximately 147 days, but a few ewes will lamb after 140 days. Be present when ewes lamb. Help the ewe in delivery only when needed. If lambs are chilled, dry them and use artificial heat. Paint navel cords with iodine within an hour after lambs are born. Feed ewes legume hay plus a pound or more of oats or bran at first; then gradually increase grain for milk production.

8. Increase Income by Docking and Castrating. Dock and castrate lambs at 7 to 10 days of age. Do not excite lambs before the operation. Disinfect the scrotum, tail, and instruments used. Check on lambs and be prepared to stop excessive bleeding. If there is danger of screwworm, use a recommended fly repellent.

9. Feed for Maximum Growth From Birth to Market. Feed ewes a milk-producing ration until pastures are ready for grazing. One to 1½ pounds of a mixture of six parts corn, three parts oats or bran, and one part soybean meal or a similar mixture is an adequate daily ration for ewes fed good legume hay.

If ewes are being fed low-protein roughage, such as corn silage or grass hay, feed 0.4 to 0.5 pound of soybean, cottonseed, or linseed oil meal per head daily, along with ½ to 1 pound of a grain mixture such as two parts corn and one part oats or bran.

Graze ewes on good pastures and creep-feed lambs.

10. Increase Wool Value by Proper Shearing and Handling. Shear early in March. This will cause ewes to seek

shelter which lambs need in bad weather. Be sure fleeces are dry before shearing and store wool in a dry place. Avoid second cuts of wool and injuries to ewes. Shear on a clean floor. Keep black fleeces, burry wool, tags, and sweatlocks separate from top grade wool. Tie with paper twine passed twice around and across the fleece. Pack in bag properly and sell on a graded basis.

11. Sell on High Markets When Lambs are Fat and Weigh 90 Pounds. Markets are highest for spring lambs in May and early June. Sort lambs and sell when they are fat and weigh *at least* 85 pounds. If lambs are receiving abundant milk and have been creep-fed, they will usually be fat and heavy enough to top the market.

12. Increase Profits and Efficiency by Controlling Parasites. Drench ewes at least three times a year and more often if needed:

- after the first hard freeze (December 1);
- before going on pasture in the spring; and
- approximately July 1.

There are several good anthelmintics (drugs which expel or destroy worms) available for sheep, and new ones are being developed. See your veterinarian or area livestock specialist for current recommendations. Alternating the materials may provide some advantage.

Drench more often if ewes are out of condition and show signs of anemia as indicated by paleness of eyelid linings. Scours may also indicate a heavy worm infestation. Rotate pastures as often as practical.

Inspect flock during September or October for lice and ticks. Spray and dust or dip if the sheep are infested. Current recommendations are available through your county University of Missouri Extension Center. Another treatment just after shearing may help.

Use a recommended fly repellent on open wounds during the fly season. Tag ewes in the summer to prevent maggots.

