

Breeding Ewe Lambs

Within shepherds' circles, arguments abound on the advantages and disadvantages of breeding ewe lambs. Generally, institutional research findings point to an increased lifetime productivity for ewes when they are bred as ewe lambs to give birth at 12-14 months of age. In addition, ewe lambs should represent the most advanced and improved genetics in your flock. Shortening the generation interval will advance genetic improvement. If ewe lambs are left open and are fed too heavily, they may deposit fat in the udder which will reduce their lactation potential in later years. However, breeding ewe lambs must take into account several practical considerations in order to minimize potential problems with breeding, parturition and lactation stress.

Puberty occurs when the ewe lamb first exhibits estrus. The onset of puberty is influenced greatly by breed and nutrition. Most ewe lambs will start to exhibit estrus at 4-5 months of age. However, this does not mean that the ewe lamb is physically or mentally mature enough to handle the demands of pregnancy, parturition and lactation. Maternal breeds such as the Finnsheep, Romanov and Rideau Arcott tend to reach puberty at an earlier age than sire breeds such as the Texel or Hampshire. Adequate levels of nutrition during the growing period will reduce the age of puberty. Single reared ewe lambs tend to mature faster than twins or triplets and cross-bred ewe lambs will mature faster than purebreds.



Ewe lambs develop at different rates. The Rideau Arcott (front) is ready for breeding. The Texel (back) is not.

Do not breed ewe lambs until they are at least 7-9 months of age and have reached at least 70% of their mature size. This growth should be achieved with moderate nutrition levels in order to avoid over-conditioning which can result in reproduction and lactation problems. Ewe lambs that are overfed will deposit fat in the developing udder which will reduce their milking potential. As well, fat tends to build up in the birth canal which will

make for a difficult lambing and predispose the ewe lamb to prolapse. Conversely, ewe lambs that are underfed will give birth to small, weak lambs. Once they enter lactation they will not produce a good quantity of milk and the nutritional setback may stunt their potential mature size. Ideally, ewe lambs should be maintained separately from the mature ewes in order to meet their unique nutritional requirements. Their condition should be scored frequently to maintain them at the ideal moderate scores of 3-4.

At breeding, the ewe lambs should be in a separate breeding group from the mature ewes. Many rams will selectively mate older ewes due to their increased pheromone secretion and courting activity. For the same reason, when breeding ewe lambs, use an aggressive ram because the lambs will not be as encouraging as the older ewes. Remember to schedule breeding so that the ewe lamb group will lamb at a separate time from the main flock. This allows the producer to concentrate their efforts, resources and vigilance on this group at lambing.

Caution should be exercised when breeding ewe lambs to large sire breeds. Increased birth weights can lead to increased incidence of lambing difficulties and miss-mothering. Breeding ewe lambs to rams of breeds with smaller mature size can reduce the incidence of difficult births.

Lactation nutrition is critical for the ewe lamb. She will need to meet her personal needs for growth while also raising lambs. The producer may consider earlier weaning of lambs born to ewe lambs. This will allow the ewe lamb more time to recover from lactation before the next breeding season. Ewe lambs require approximately 25% more nutrition than mature ewes during pregnancy and lactation, in order to meet their own continuing requirements for growth and development, as well as the nutritional demands of producing and raising lambs.

In summary, breeding ewe lambs can be productive, profitable and result in advanced genetic progress if the producer is willing to give them extra vigilance and care. It is not a practice that is suitable for everyone and depends on the resources available to the producer and the breeds and management systems they employ. Not all ewe lambs are ready to be bred their first year. The producer should carefully select the most mature ewe lambs in the group for breeding.

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