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Breeding Ewe Lambs to Lamb First as Yearlings

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ANIMAL SCIENCE FACT SHEET

Breeding Ewe Lambs to Lamb First as Yearlings

by
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Getting the highest possible production from ewes is a goal of every sheep producer. Sheep respond well to management and will usually pay a producer for the extra time he spends in caring for them. Breeding ewe lambs is a practice that can pay dividends but requires the right management to make it work. Many years ago this practice was deemed unwise because it severely affected the young mothers in many ways. Modern research has spelled out requirements in terms of size and management that make a successful, workable program.

The advantages of breeding ewe lambs are many and cause an accumulative effect on reproduction. Some of those advantages are:

(1) It provides a greater opportunity for selection for improved reproductive performance. Studies in New Zealand have shown that selection of ewes that breed as ewe lambs will improve twinning rate as fast as selecting directly for twinning. If replacements are selected both on being born as twins and breeding as ewe lambs, fairly rapid progress can be made even though the heritability of twinning is quite low.

(2) Greater lifetime production of number and weight of lambs. An early North Dakota study reported results of two equal groups of ewes. One group lambed first as yearlings and the other didn't lamb until they were 2 years old. After 6 years the group lambing first as yearlings had produced 12% more lambs than the other group. They further reported that longevity, fleece weights, and mature weights were the same for both groups.

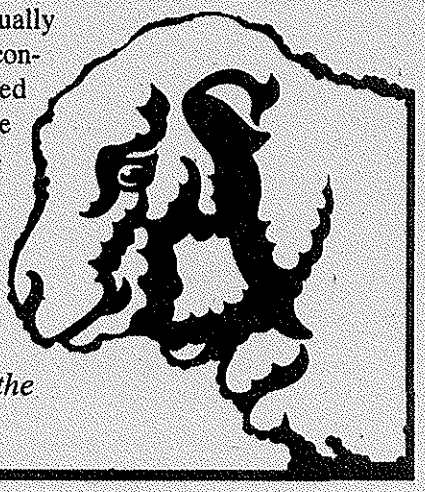
Breeding ewe lambs can increase production of a sheep flock and improve income, but this practice requires special management. The following are some important considerations:

(1) Breed ewes the right time of year. The breeding season of ewe lambs lasts only about 1/3 long as mature ewes, and heat periods tend to be more irregular. Studies have shown that November is the optimum month to breed spring born ewe lambs. Satisfactory results were obtained in October for lambs born earlier.

(2) Breed and size have a great effect on getting ewe lambs bred. Ewes of the conventional breeds (Rambouillet, Targhee & Columbia) reach satisfactory reproductive performance only at body weights of 120 pounds at the beginning of the breeding season. Ewes with Finn breeding reach sexual maturity at much lighter weights. Table 1 shows the expected lambing rates of ewe lambs of different breeds and body weights. Ewe lambs to be bred should be weaned early and placed on good feed through the breeding season to get the desired result. Table 2 shows examples of rations and feed costs required to get lambs of conventional breeds to acceptable breeding weights. Cost may be prohibitive to get small ewe lambs to desired breeding weight.

(3) If possible, breed ewe lambs separately from mature ewes. Ewe lambs do not compete well with mature ewes for available feed when fed together. Also, ewe lambs fail to compete with mature ewes for the attention of the rams. Rams used to breed ewe lambs should be of a breed and type to allow for easy lambing and not cause lambing difficulties.

(4) *Breeding ewe lambs requires increased management.* In addition to setting up a feeding program to get ewe lambs fed out for breeding, extra care of these young ewes at lambing time is needed. Shed lambing procedures are excellent to lamb ewes their first year. Whether shed or range lambing is used, ample time should be provided in small groups for bonding of young mothers to their lambs. Single rearing is usually preferred for yearling mothers. Multiple births may be too heavy a drain on the immature ewes and result in an unusually high lamb loss. Good feed conditions must be provided throughout lactation. If the young ewes begin to become weak by loss of condition, early weaning of their lambs should be considered.



Tables 1 and 2 are on the reverse side.

(5) Ewe lambs that fail to breed may be sold for slaughter. Ram marking harnesses may be used to indicate those ewes that have been bred or ultra sound pregnancy test for selecting those pregnant. If sufficient bred ewes are available for replacements, ewes not breeding can be fattened and sold for slaughter.

If organized properly, having ewes lamb first as yearlings does work. Not only do these ewes produce an extra lamb crop but have been shown to achieve greater lamb production throughout their lifetime. Data collected at the U. S. Sheep Station show the ewes lambing first as yearlings produced as much as 20 pounds more lamb per year than those starting as 2 year olds.

Table 1: Percent Lambs Born by Weight Group and Breed of Mother

Weight Into Breeding	Percent Lambs Born of Ewes Bred		Weight Out of Breeding
	Conventional Breeds	Finns & Crosses	
64	3	74	84
74	6	102	95
84	18	106	104
94	34	108	113
104	34	130	123
114	54	121	132
124	89	122	143

*Adapted from research at U.S. Sheep Experiment Station

Table 2: Calculated A.D.G. Ration Balance and Cost to Increase Weight of Ewe Lambs of Conventional Breeds to 120 Pounds in a 60-Day Feed Period

Weaning Weight	A.D.G.	Corn in Ration[a]			
		%	Lbs./Daily	Cost/Day[b]	Feed Cost[b]
80	.67	61	2.37	.17	$15.30
95	.42	25	1.00	.15	$13.50
110	.17	7	.30	.12	$10.80

[a]Assumes feeding alfalfa hay free choice.

[b]Based on alfalfa hay @ $75/T, shelled corn @ $110/T. Feed cost includes a 30-day breeding period.

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