

*News Article*

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## Understanding agriculture: sheep

If you are one who is perplexed by simple questions about agriculture that you don't understand, read on. Today's article is a primer on sheep, written primarily for the curious non-farmer.

Sheep originated in Asia from ancient times. Several stories involving sheep are found in the Bible. For thousands of years, sheep have provided food and clothing for people. They have been used as pack animals, and some breeds can even be milked.

In recent centuries, sheep have become important providers of meat. Sheep were brought to North America by Spanish and English settlers. Historians tell us that Columbus brought the animals to the New World on his second voyage in 1493. Approximately three-fourths of sheep in the United States are west of the Mississippi River. Indiana currently ranks 26<sup>th</sup> in sheep and lambs on farms among all states, just 1% of U.S. inventories. The largest sheep-producing states are Texas, California and Colorado.

Products we get from sheep include wool, lanolin (used in moisturizing creams), meat (called lamb from market animals, or mutton from mature animals), yarn and other products. Wool is sheared annually from sheep, much like we receive regular haircuts. Wool is used for carpet and for garments, like sweaters, blankets and socks. Wool color is either white, black or natural-color (shades of black, gray, silver, brown, beige, red or blonde).

There are several terms associated with sheep production. One who raises and cares for sheep is called a shepherd. A ewe is a female sheep, and a ram is a male sheep. A wether is a male sheep that has been castrated. A group of sheep is called a flock. A fleece is the wool from a single sheep. A baby sheep is called a lamb. Birthing is called lambing.

The average gestation (pregnancy) period of a ewe is 148 days.

Breeds of sheep include Dorset, Hampshire, Suffolk, Oxford, Merino, Southdown and others. Some breeds are known more for their wool production, while others are better suited for meat production. Breeds known for their wool produce fine, medium or long types of wool. Suffolk is the breed with most purebred registrations in the U.S., and is known for its meatiness and high carcass quality.

Lamb cuts include lamb chops, rack roast, sirloin, leg of lamb, and other cuts. According to USDA, a 3 oz. lamb chop (arm, braised), lean only, has 237 calories, 30 grams of protein, and 12 grams of fat. A 3 oz. broiled loin lamb chop, lean only, has 184 calories, 25 grams of protein, and 8 grams of fat.

Wool has unique qualities. A wool fiber has a certain amount of crimp (waviness of wool fiber, determined largely by breed), good tensile strength, is finer and more elastic than human hair, absorbs water, is non-conductive, a good insulator, easily dyed, and nonflammable.

Predators, such as coyotes and wild dogs, are a problem in sheep flocks. Many shepherds use guard dogs or other guard animals trained to protect sheep. Guard dog breeds include Great Pyrenees, Komondor, Anatolian Shepherd, Maremma, and Akbash Dog. Other guard animals may include llamas, donkeys, mules, or ostriches. Some research indicates that co-grazing sheep with cattle reduces predation by coyotes.

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Sheep are a ruminant animal (they have a 4-chambered stomach). Much like cattle, sheep need a combination of roughages (high in fiber), grains, protein supplements and other feeds. Water is always made available. Sheep often graze pastures, or they are fed hay.

The behavior of sheep is worth mentioning. Sheep have an innate sense or fear of predators and other dangers, and they are easily frightened or spooked. They will tend to stay together in a group (flocking instinct), and move as a group. Most sheep also have a strong territorial instinct, and are comfortable in areas they consider "home," such as barns, barn lots and pastures. They become used to their shepherds and guard animals. Sheep, like several other animals, are colorblind. They have wide angle vision, lack the ability to recognize small details, but have good depth perception. When moving sheep, shepherds know that if they can get one to go, the flock will go, due to their gregarious nature.

Shepherds work with veterinarians to manage the health of their flock. Diseases and internal parasites can be major problems.

According to USDA (preliminary figures), Indiana farmers had 52,000 sheep and lambs on farms in 2017, with an average value of \$223 per head, and a total value of \$11,596,000. In 2016, commercial sheep slaughter was 44,700 head, averaging 112 pounds in live weight. Wool production in 2016 was from 35,000 sheep shorn, at an average of 6.3 pounds per fleece, 220,000 total pounds of wool, at an average price of 50 cents per pound, with a total value of \$110,000.

Some material was sourced from *Sheep Resource Handbook*, by The Ohio State University, and *Sheep Production Handbook*, by American Sheep Industry Association, Inc.