



to be a shepherd – **now you get to lamb**

Starting a new small flock can be very fulfilling and profitable – if managed correctly.

The reality is lambing begins at the end of 140-155 days of gestation. Certain techniques can make it all easier – especially for those who work off-farm during the day.

Most flocks breed in the fall and lamb in the spring with shearing preceding lambing, but the timing in small flocks can vary according to resources. Often, lambing is completed just before the flock can move out to pasture and benefit from the nutrients in new green grass.

Before lambing

All flocks should have strong “preconditioning” health vaccination programs that include preventing introduction of diseases from outside sources. Practices like scrapie vaccinations and others can prevent low lambing percentages, abortions, low weaning weights, and other problems. It is best to have the flock in good health going into breeding, lambing, and weaning.

Rangeland sheep producers often lamb in a sheltered area that has cover and can deter predation. Predators are drawn to lambing because of the sounds and body fluids. Rangeland guardian dogs usually patrol the area and cleanup the afterbirth, reducing the predator attraction.

A week or so before lambing begins, a good practice is to gather the ewes and clip dirty wool away from their udders and birth canal to allow for good hygiene. This should be done gently since these are expectant mothers. In addition to trimming these dirty “tags” of wool, consider providing ewes some high-protein, high-passage rate feeds to provide energy and relax their digestive tracts, which aids lamb delivery. This is called “flushing.”

Provide shelter, if possible

Those with smaller flocks are often advised to use sheltered pens for lambing since they provide ready access to the sheep, protection from weather, and a central location to feed ewes as well as any lambs that may need a bottle.

Expecting ewes are often held in a barn that has small enclosures of 12-16 square feet. The ewe can be moved there when starting to lamb. These small enclosures, referred to as “jugs,” should have movement lanes between them. The jug will allow the ewe to claim and clean the lamb(s) without interference.

This set-up is crucial for first-time ewes, which may require some management before they demonstrate good maternal instincts. First-time ewes may need to be tied or coaxed to allow lambs to suckle. Once lambs nurse several times and pass feces, their smell will be recognized by the ewe and natural “claiming” usually occurs.

If the ewe has a hard udder or cannot support all her lambs, lambs may need bottle fed. These are often referred to as “bum” lambs. The lambs will need a stand-in “ewe” to feed them. The “ewe” can be a human or a ewe that recently lost her own lamb. Some small flock owners provide bottles to all lambs for the first two days to give them a jump-start.

Crucial components

Warm, dry, and suckling are the magic components to profitability.

For hygiene reasons, many producers dress the umbilical cord of the new lambs with iodine tincture so it dries up and does not get infected from surrounding sources. Regularly cleaning manure from the lambing area reduces disease risks. Clean bedding also assists comfort and warmth.

Keeping new lambs and ewes warm during this stressful period is crucial. Chilled lambs or ewes can be warmed by hanging a heat lamp over the jug. Try to keep wind currents

limited in lambing sheds and provide dry bedding as much as possible.

If a ewe does not clean a lamb in the first hour, consider toweling the lamb off but do not interfere with the ewe’s access. Some ewes take issue with humans near their lambs. Move quietly and calmly, keeping the lamb between you and the ewe so she can both see and smell it. Limit lambs and ewes interaction with others until the mother-lamb relationship is stable. A ewe must have three to six days to form a strong bond with her lamb(s).

During the delivery process, make sure the ewe expels the afterbirth and cleans it up if possible. Hormones within the material partially trigger lactation production and begin the new breeding cycle, which guarantees operation profitability. If it does not expel, contact your veterinarian or a knowledgeable sheep producer.

Ewes with lambs should be kept under shelter for at least two days. During severe or wet weather, consider two to four days. Once that period passes, move the ewes into pens with no more than 10-20 other ewes. Ewes and new lambs can get a little confused in large crowds and not find each other for feeding. They can be moved to a bigger group after 10 to 14 days.

A producer should study-up to recognize delivery processes, birthing challenges, and other problems with lambs and ewes.

Feed needs

A ewe’s dietary needs are heaviest in the last trimester of gestation and the first 60 days of lactation. The growth and strength of the lambs depend on her condition. Feed her well.

Clean water, minerals, quality hay, and protection from predators should be combined with some quality feed supplements. These all help prevent metabolic imbalances that can be a threat to the livestock. It is not unusual for experienced healthy ewes to support two to three young if fed sufficiently.

Some practices such as feeding in the evenings stimulate lambing in the mornings when light is better and temperatures may be higher (rather than middle of night). Some innovative small flock owners are artificially inseminating their ewes so most lamb on weekends. This takes some more effort. Usually, small flock owners will check their lambing sheds four to five times each day.

Goats and kidding

Goat flocks have many similar practices to sheep lambing except we refer to it as “kidding,” they seldom need to be tag sheared, and the vigor of their kids is usually more pronounced than sheep in the first two weeks. Goats also gestate from 148-152 days. Confinement for goats may require higher panels since they are very agile.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions about livestock production techniques.

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No kidding (couldn’t help ourselves), ask **Scott Cotton** questions. He is a University of Wyoming Extension educator serving Natrona, Niobrara, and Converse counties. He can be contacted at (307) 235-9400 or scotton1@uwyo.edu.

