

Facts & Figures About Canadian Sheep

In General:

- Some of the most popular breeds of sheep in Canada include: Suffolk, Dorset, and Rideau Arcott.
- In 2011, sheep farms accounted for 1.4% of Canadian farms.
- In Canada there are 1,074,300 sheep and lambs.
- Ontario has the most sheep out of the Canadian provinces with 329,100.
- Sheep normally have between one and three lambs per lambing, but can have up to five.
- A full-grown sheep weighs between 70 and 125kg.
- Sheep can be used for producing meat, milk or fibre.
- The sheep milk industry is relatively new in Canada compared to other parts of the world.
- A sheep may give up to two litres of milk per day, which is mostly used to make specialty cheeses.
- For most farmers, selling the wool of sheep makes just enough money to cover the cost of shearing. Farmers wanting to make a profit from it have specialty sheep breeds or process wool and sell products from it such as yarn.
- Canadian sheep producers can only fill approximately half of domestic demand for mutton and lamb, making an export market virtually non-existent.



Facts courtesy of Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency

You were asking about...Sheep

Housing: Where do Sheep Live?

Places that sheep live are as diverse as the shepherds who care for them.

Some shepherds prefer to keep their flock in the barn year round where nutrition, lighting and lambing can be closely monitored and to offer protection from predators such as coyotes, wolves, bears, ravens, and even their neighbours' pet dogs. Sheep are kept together in group pens in the barn.

Others prefer to leave the sheep in the field all year, depending on pastures to graze for their food and offering hay and grain when the snow gets too deep. Even though sheep have wool, they still need barns or treed windbreaks for shelter in the winter.

Most farms use elements of both systems.

Some flocks (groups of sheep) lamb in barns during the winter, while others lamb on pastures in the spring, depending on the facilities and goals of each farmer. Most ewes lambing in barns are put in "claiming pens" or "jugs" (individual pens) after they lamb (give birth) so they can bond with their newborn lambs. The ewe and lambs will stay in these pens on fresh straw bedding for one to three days so the shepherd can give them special attention. To keep the lambs warm and dry, the shepherd may install a heat lamp.

Flock sizes range from two sheep on hobby farms to 1500 ewes with their lambs on farms where there could be two or three full time shepherds.

Modern shepherds use the most advanced husbandry practices in accordance with the guidelines set out in the Code of Practice.

Nutrition: What do Sheep Eat?

Sheep are ruminant herbivores, meaning that they eat plant matter and digest it in a series of four stomach compartments. When a sheep eats, it chews and swallows and the feed enters the first stomach compartment, the rumen, where it is mixed with fluids containing bacteria and other microorganisms to help break down the cellulose fibres. The sheep will then “chew its cud”: regurgitate the food and re-chew it into smaller particles. The chewed cud is swallowed again and eventually passes into the second stomach compartment, the reticulum, for further processing. Then it's on to the third stomach compartment, the omasum, which removes a lot of the moisture from the mixture. The fourth stomach compartment is the abomasum, which, like the human stomach, is very acidic for the digestion of proteins.

The majority of a sheep's diet is forages - pasture and hay that can include grasses, alfalfa, and clover. Sheep often graze on land that can't be cultivated for human food production.

About the Life Cycle of Sheep...

Most ewes (female sheep) are bred by natural mating to a ram (male sheep), but some special ewes are bred by artificial insemination, a procedure that allows shepherds to import the best genetics without the health risks of introducing a new ram into the flock. The age at which a ewe is first bred depends on the producers' goals, objectives and genetics involved, but generally a ewe lamb should be at least 85 - 100 lbs at first breeding and should receive adequate nutrition until first lambing.

Sheep are seasonal breeders, meaning they breed most successfully when day length is getting shorter, from late August to January. After a gestation (pregnancy) of approximately five months, lambing will occur from mid-January to June.

Single lambs are most common but twin and triplet births are not uncommon. Some ewes have even given birth to four or five lambs at once. Birth weights range from two to five kg, depending on if the lamb comes as a single, twin, or triplet birth, the age of the ewe, her breed and her nutrition. Depending upon how the shepherd chooses to manage the flock, ewes may lamb (give birth) only once per year or up to five times in three years.

Some farmers hire specially trained ultrasound technicians to ultrasound ewes approximately four to six weeks before lambing. This is done to determine if the ewe is pregnant or not, and how many lambs each ewe is carrying. The pregnant ewes may be sorted into groups based on expected number of lambs and fed diets balanced specifically for their expected nutritional requirements.

Sheep are usually shorn in the spring to keep them cool for the summer. Pregnant ewes are shorn two to six weeks before they lamb so the lamb will be able to find a teat to suck on instead of sucking on wool.

At certain times in the production cycle shepherds may also feed grains, such as corn, barley, oats, and roasted soybeans, which are mixed with supplemental vitamins and minerals as needed. Grain supplementation is an important part of a balanced diet for fast-growing lambs, ewes in late gestation (within weeks of giving birth), or ewes with high milk production.

A mature sheep will eat approximately three kg of hay and grass per day. Weaned lambs will eat about one kg of grain and one kg of hay or grass every day.

Sheep are native to arid regions. They are able to survive on a diet with less water intake than other livestock. For maximum production though, they do need access to a continuous supply of fresh drinking water. On average a mature sheep will drink between one and 2.5 gallons (3.8 - 9.5 L) of water per day except after lambing when they will require more fresh water in order to produce large quantities of milk for fast growing lambs.



Young lambs have their tails shortened to protect them from biting insects as well as to keep them clean. They are given vaccinations starting as newborns. The farmer will usually give each lamb an ear tag. Since 2004 all sheep are required to have an approved identification tag to track sheep movements in case of a disease outbreak.

Until weaning, lambs may have access to their own special feed area called a “creep” to receive extra grain or more lush pasture. Ewes nurse their lambs from six to 10 weeks, until the lambs reach between 27 to 32 kg and are ready to be weaned from milk to eat solid feed and drink water.

After weaning, many growing lambs may be placed in specialized facilities called “feedlots” where they receive carefully balanced rations that allow them to grow quickly on less feed. Some farmers may opt to leave the lambs on pasture to grow.

Lambs are raised to different weights for different markets. The new crop market is typically 29 kg or less live weight and sold directly from the dam. Light lambs are preferred by a segment of the market and range from about 29 kg to 38 kg. Heavy lambs range from 39 kg to 47 kg.

Sheep are considered full-grown at one year old, weighing between 70 and 125 kg.

Sheep raised to produce milk for the sheep cheese market are called dairy sheep. Lambs are removed from the ewe within 48 -60 hours after birth and raised artificially on a sheep milk replacer formula. The sheep are milked in dairy facilities that resemble milking parlours for cattle. There is a well-established dairy industry in France from which dairy equipment is imported for use in Canada. A sheep may give up to two litres of milk per day.

Breeds

There are many different production systems for sheep and for each unique production system, farmers select different kinds of sheep that will match their farming conditions. Some of the most popular breeds in Canada include: Suffolk, Dorset, and Rideau Arcott.

On some farms the whole flock is purebred (all the same breed) and the shepherd sells breeding stock to other shepherds to improve certain characteristics of their flocks. Other flocks raise crossbreds (mate rams of one breed with ewes of another breed) to produce offspring with the good traits from both breeds. Many new strains have been developed in Canada from cross breeding, such as Rideau, Canadian, and Outouais Arcotts, DLS, and OLIBS.

While the above breeds are best known for their meat, some farms concentrate on filling niche markets for wool using Lincoln, Cotswold, Romnov and Jacob bloodlines; dairy sheep may be selected for their milking ability from East Friesian and British Milkshoop bloodlines.

For more information on breeds of sheep visit www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/ or www.sheep-breeders.ca (Canadian Sheep Breeders' Association).

Off to Market

Sheep and market lambs are sent to abattoirs on trucks specifically set up for sheep. There are strict guidelines for transporting sheep, including the number of sheep or lambs of a certain size that can be safely loaded on a truck.

Each animal is inspected at the processing plant. Sheep are handled and euthanized quickly and humanely by approved methods. Processing plants follow strict government guidelines for processing and handling animals and meat products to ensure animal welfare and food safety.

The marketing of sheep is not supply managed, meaning that the market forces of supply and demand will affect the price that the farmer receives.

Sheep Dictionary

- **Ewe:** a female sheep that has had a lamb.
- **Ewe lamb:** a female sheep that has not yet given birth to a lamb.
- **Fleece:** a sheep's wool after it has been shorn off, in one piece.
- **Flock:** a group of sheep.
- **Hogget:** same as ewe lamb.
- **Lamb:** a sheep under one year old, or the meat that comes from a youthful sheep under one year old.
- **Lambing:** the time when lambs are born.
- **Mutton:** meat from mature sheep (not lamb).
- **Ram:** a male sheep.
- **Ruminant:** a four stomached animal that chews its cud, includes cattle, sheep, goats, and deer.
- **Shepherd:** a farmer who cares for sheep.
- **Wether:** a neutered male sheep.



SHEEP TRIVIA

- Sheep have naturally occurring oil on their wool called "lanolin." The lanolin makes the wool water repellent and prevents the cold rain and snow from penetrating to the sheep's skin.
- Sheep are grazers, goats are browsers. Goats prefer to eat leaves from trees and small shrubs, whereas sheep prefer grass.
- Sheep give approximately 2 litres of milk per day.
- 2.5kg of wool can be spun into 33km of fine yarn.
- The majority of lambs in Ontario are raised for meat.
- A ewe can identify her lamb by its bleat.
- A sheep can be shorn in less than three minutes by an experienced shearer.

Sheep Trivia (Courtesy of Cyberspace Farm:

- There are 150 yards (450 feet) of wool yarn in a baseball.
- Sheep have no top front teeth but the roof of their mouth is hard. This permits sheep to eat vegetation close to the ground and prevents them from pulling up plant roots.
- One mature ewe produces 7 to 10 pounds of newly shorn wool a year - enough to make a man's suit.
- The small intestines from 11 sheep are needed to make one tennis racket.
- Sheep have poor eyesight but an excellent sense of hearing.
- One pound of wool can be spun into 20 miles of fine yarn.

Sheep
FACT SHEET

Sheep: The Product

Consumer Products: What Comes From Sheep?

The main market for sheep is for lamb meat. Ontario is a world leader in the development of sheep with an extended breeding season, which means that fresh lamb is now available all year round.

Mutton comes from sheep greater than one year of age. A leg of mutton can be smoked, like ham, and the rest of the meat may be used for ground meat or sausage. Some ethnic groups particularly from Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and West Indies use mutton in a wide variety of dishes including roasts, stews and other specialty dishes.

A recent market development related to the health advantage of lamb and sheep meat (high in zinc and manganese, lower in fatty acids) is the designer healthy pet food industry.

Most shepherds only make enough money from their wool to pay for the shearing. To make more money from wool, some producers may add

value by raising certain breeds of sheep with special wool qualities, and/or processing the wool further on farm to fill niche markets for clean spinning wool, yarn, clothing, quilt batting, etc.

Then there is sheep milk. Yes, it's true! In Ontario alone there are approximately 40 farm families who raise sheep for milk, as well as meat and wool. It is mostly used to make specialty cheeses. This is an emerging production system in Canada unlike parts of eastern and central Europe where it has been a long-time tradition. As in cattle, milk is cooled and stored for transportation to a cheese making plant.

Shepherds take great pride in raising sheep that produce quality meat, milk and fibre, and many take part in friendly competitions at local fairs, making sheep farming part of the rural lifestyle.

For more information about sheep visit the Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency at www.ontariosheep.org or for recipe ideas visit www.lambrecipes.ca



About Sheep - Who to Call

Canadian Sheep Federation:

Visit www.cansheep.ca

Canadian Sheep Breeders Association:

Visit www.sheepbreeders.ca

Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency:

Visit www.ontariosheep.org

BC Sheep Federation:

Visit www.bcsheepfed.com

Alberta Sheep Breeders' Association:

Visit www.albertasheep.ca

Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board

www.sksheep.com

Manitoba Sheep Association:

Visit www.mbsheep.ca

Centre d'expertise en production ovine du Quebec

www.cepoq.com

Purebred Sheep Breeders of Nova Scotia:

Visit www.sheepnovascotia.ns.ca

Sheep Producers Association of Newfoundland and Labrador

Phone: 709-596-3974

 **Sheep**
FACT SHEET

Prepared by:



Farm & Food Care Ontario
www.farmfoodcare.org
519-837-1326
info@farmfoodcare.org