

ALBERTA SHEEP

Having a Plan When Selecting a Terminal Sire

Sheep producers often leave one of the most important management decisions they ever make to a friend or neighbour or impulse purchase. I'm talking about the decision of what breed of ram to buy. I meet a lot of sheep producers who work hard feeding their sheep every day, lambing them out, providing health care, etc., and after all that hard work, they buy or borrow the first ram they see – something the neighbour is getting rid of, or something that's cheap or interesting-looking at a sale.

The breed of ram has a huge effect on the productivity of a flock, and the flock manager – the one who knows the strengths and weaknesses of the flock – should be the one making that decision. One ram might cost \$100 more than another, or might be 100 miles farther away, requiring more effort to get him home, but might have a huge effect on the growth rate of the lambs the next year, that would more than compensate for the extra expense. If he is going to sire ewes that will stay in the flock, then his influence will be felt in the flock for years and years after that extra \$100 has long been spent.

Step One: Know whether you are buying a terminal sire or not.

A terminal sire is one whose offspring all go to slaughter. If a ram's offspring are all going to be market lambs, then you don't have to worry about how prolific the ram is, how good a ewe his mother was or how good his wool is. All you have to care about is the survival rate of his lambs, how fast they will grow, and how good their carcasses will be.

If you're going to keep daughters from this ram, then you do need to worry about prolificacy, and mothering and milking ability. If you're running an extensive operation, you also need a breed that has a strong flocking instinct and grazing ability. The price of wool isn't consistently high enough for that to be a factor in choosing a breed for a commercial flock.

Step Two: Once you've determined whether or not you're buying a terminal sire, you have to choose a specific breed.

Terminal sire breeds include Suffolk, Hampshire, Charollais, Canadian Arcott and Texel, listed in approximate order of their mature size. It's pretty well established that the larger the mature size of a ram, the leaner his offspring will be at any given weight. In other words, the heavier you're going to sell your lambs, the bigger a terminal sire you need.

If you're not buying a terminal sire, you'll be looking for breeds that specialize in fertility or prolificacy (e.g., Finn, Romanov), lamb survival (Romanov), milk production (e.g., East Friesian, Lacaune), mothering ability (e.g., Dorsets), or flocking instinct/grazing ability (e.g., Rambouillet, Columbia, Merino). Or you may be looking for something you don't have to shear (e.g., Katahdin, Dorper).



Don't be afraid to combine two of these breeds by buying a crossbred ram. For example, a Romanov-East Friesian ram will sire one quarter Romanov, one quarter East Friesian ewes, which will add prolificacy and milk production to your flock, without adding the extremely high numbers of lambs or milk production that a purebred ram of either breed might create, which require specialized feeding and management.

If you don't want to fool around with mixing and matching breeds in your ewe flock, there are a couple of synthetic breeds (breeds made by combining the desirable attributes of two or more existing breeds) out there (e.g., Rideau Arcott, Polypay) that have been selected for desirable characteristics in the ewe flock.

Step Three: There's a third step, of course, choosing the flock and the individual ram, and health plays as big a role in this step as genetics, but that's another whole article another day.

The point of this article isn't to persuade anyone to use any particular breed, it's to persuade you to have a plan when you bring home your next new ram. Decide what your flock needs yourself and go out and get it, don't just take the next ram that shows up in your yard on a truck needing a home, or buy one because it's cheap or you only have to go down the road a mile to get it. The breed makeup of your flock has as much of an impact on the profitability of your flock as your feeding program – you're the manager, you get to make it!

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