

EXTENSION BULLETIN 332

*Western Ewes*  
for  
**MICHIGAN FARM FLOCKS**

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EAST LANSING



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# Western Ewes for Michigan Farm Flocks

By GRAYDON BLANK<sup>1</sup> and R. E. RUST<sup>2</sup>

Sheep can make you money. Lamb and wool provide two sources of income from the sheep flock, and they are marketed at different seasons of the year. Neither lamb nor wool are likely to be produced in over-supply in the immediate future.

Sheep are adaptable to many Michigan farms. Their ability to make efficient use of large quantities of roughage makes them especially suited to a grassland farming program. A profitable ewe flock will make use of 13½ acres of hay and pasture for each acre of grain. No other class of livestock can be so successfully maintained on such a high proportion of roughage.

Buildings and equipment need not be expensive or elaborate. Very often there are buildings on the farm that can be converted into adequate sheep shelters at little or no expense. Reasonably good fences are required for sheep. The investment in the breeding flock is low in comparison to the cattle enterprises.

Michigan flocks that receive good care and attention require a very small amount of labor. Approximately 5 hours of labor per ewe per year is required, and only 25 percent of the work with sheep occurs during the growing and harvesting season for farm crops.

These are some of the reasons why sheep flocks continue to produce a net profit which compares favorably with other farm enterprises.

Year after year the more profitable ewe flocks have been those that have followed an early lambing program, creep-fed the lambs, and marketed choice to prime lambs at 4 to 5 months of age during June and July. On the average, spring lamb prices are high in June and decline into October and November.

For those without facilities for early lambing, the ewe flock may be maintained entirely on hay and pasture, with the lambs dropped on pasture. These lambs can then be sold in the fall as feeder lambs or, if grain is available, they can be fed and sold as choice to prime lambs.

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Fig. 1. Yearling.



Fig. 2. Two-year-old.



Some of the farming situations to which sheep are adapted in Michigan are: (1) Flocks of several hundred ewes as a major enterprise on large farms with a high proportion of the land in forage; (2) An important minor enterprise on farms with excess roughage and little labor; (3) For some older farmers who want to lighten their labor load; and (4) As a source of income on part-time farms.

### WHY WESTERN EWES?

It is usually a difficult task to obtain young native ewes in sufficient numbers to establish a uniform flock. Western ewes are available in large numbers every year during the late summer and early fall. They are cheaper than native sheep and can be bought in numbers, from a few head to carload lots. Western ewes can be purchased which are uniform in type, breeding, size, and age. These are decided advantages from the standpoint of producing a uniform crop of lambs. They are hardy and long-lived, and reasonably free from internal parasites.

While not noted for producing twins, they are good mothers and good milkers. With good care and management, it is entirely possible to produce an average of 100 pounds of lamb and 8 pounds of wool per ewe per year.

### WHAT ABOUT REPLACEMENT EWES?

In most years, it is possible to buy a good yearling western ewe for about the same price or less than the market value of a good, growthy, native ewe lamb. Older western ewes often are available at about half the price of a native ewe lamb. Under such circumstances, it is more advantageous to sell the ewe lambs and buy western replacements. The yearling or older ewe will produce a lamb crop the first year. When raising replacements, it will take two years before a lamb crop can be secured. Actually the feed which would be needed to care for replacement ewes could be used to maintain a larger flock of producing ewes, thus increasing the returns from the sheep enterprise.

There are two good reasons often advanced for saving lambs as replacement ewes. By using mutton type rams on the western ewe, the quality and conformation of the replacements can be improved and consequently a higher quality lamb crop can be produced. Also, by saving ewe lambs from the higher producing ewes, the productivity

of the flock can be increased and around a 150-percent lamb crop can be raised—as compared to approximately a 100 percent lamb crop from the western ewe.

### WHAT ARE WESTERN EWES?

To farmers familiar with native mutton breeds of sheep, western ewes may not look attractive. They are usually smaller, they may look thin, and may have been sheared late in the season. Western ewes will also show a predominance of fine wool breeding. This is necessary to keep up flocking instinct so important in range sheep. Western ewes are often grouped into the breed and age classifications following.

#### BREED

1. **WHITE-FACED EWES**—These are the ewes of Rambouillet type. They may be nearly 100 percent Rambouillet, they may be Corriedale or Columbia crosses on Rambouillet, or they may be a Lincoln-Rambouillet cross. These ewes are characterized by white faces fairly free from wool. White faced ewes may have a few wrinkles or folds of skin down the neck. Their bodies are more angular than are those of mutton sheep, and to a person used to seeing native mutton sheep, they look thin. These sheep will produce a fleece which generally grades fine or one-half blood. As the ewes get older, the length of fiber may become shorter than staple length. However, they are hardy and long-lived and will band together while grazing.

2. **BLACK-FACED WESTERN EWES**—These ewes result from crossing black-faced rams, usually Suffolk or Hampshire, on range ewes. The western range man has made this cross to improve the quality of the lambs he sells. He generally does not keep the ewe lambs on the range for breeding purposes. The black-faced ewe shows more mutton type and is usually larger than the white-faced ewe. The black-faced ewe will shear well, with the fleece generally grading three-eighths blood.

#### AGE

Black-faced ewes are sold as lambs or yearlings while the white-faced ewes may be sold as yearlings (Fig. 1), twos (Fig. 2), threes (Fig. 3), fours or "solid mouths" (Fig. 4), "spreaders" (Fig. 5), "broken mouths" (Fig. 6), or "gummers". "Solid mouths" have all of their adult teeth in place. The exact age cannot be told, but they are generally



Fig. 3. Three-year-old.



Fig. 4. "Full mouth"  
(four-year-old or  
older).

4 years or older. The term "spreaders" refers to an age between solid mouth and broken mouth, where the teeth show wear and have begun to spread but none have been lost. "Broken mouth" means that some of the adult teeth have been lost, while the term "gummers" refers to sheep that have lost all of their incisors or front teeth.

"Solid mouths" will usually be good for several crops of lambs, while "broken mouths" and "gummers" are usually good for only one year. If handled properly and bought cheaply, these "one-term" ewes can be handled at a profit. Under good care and management they will raise a crop of lambs and wool, and still have some value as slaughter ewes. The one-term ewe should not be handled in large flocks.

### WHERE DO WESTERN EWES ORIGINATE?

Both the northwest and southwest United States are major sheep-producing areas. Ewes coming from these regions have distinctly different characteristics. Ewes from the southwest are generally small and carry a predominance of Merino breeding. Ewes from the northwest are larger, smoother bodied and have longer staple wool.

All things being equal, it is advisable to purchase ewes coming from the northwest. They have enjoyed an excellent reputation over the past years. Almost always they will be found in better condition than ewes coming from the southwest.

### HOW AND WHEN TO PURCHASE

Carload lots of ewes can be purchased directly from the range. However, for the inexperienced buyer as well as for the person desiring only a few ewes, it is best to contact a local livestock marketing agency or livestock dealer specializing in bringing western ewes into Michigan.

Western ewes become available during the early fall. Farmers who wish to secure several hundred or more of these ewes should make contact with the agency or dealer well in advance, so that a uniform lot of ewes can be purchased for them.

### KIND OF RAM TO USE

Most farmers who buy western ewes plan to market all of the lambs raised, not saving any ewe lambs for replacements. When this is done, rams of the mutton breed should be used. No one breed can be said to be superior to all others. The most important thing to





Fig. 5. "Spreader"  
(six-year-old or  
older).

Fig. 6. "Broken  
mouth" (generally  
older than six years).



remember is select a good ram regardless of breed. Those breeds most generally used include Hampshire, Suffolk, Oxford, Shropshire, South-down, Cheviot, Dorset, and Montadale.

Many farmers who wish to save ewe lambs from western ewes prefer to save a white-faced ewe with excellent shearing qualities. In that case, one of the following breeds of rams are used: Corriedale, Columbia, Rambouillet, Black Top, Lincoln, Cotswold, or Dorset.

If they prefer to put more emphasis on body conformation and high quality market lambs, the ewe lamb replacements may be saved from mutton-type rams such as the Hampshire, Suffolk, Oxford, or Shropshire.

### NUMBER OF RAMS TO USE

A healthy, vigorous, yearling ram can handle about 40 ewes. Two- or three-year-old rams can be used on as many as 50 ewes. Well-grown ram lambs should not be expected to handle more than 20 ewes. A check ram should always be used after the main ram has been turned with the flock for six weeks. When rams are turned with a large flock of ewes, plan on one mature ram for every 30 to 35 ewes.

### HOW TO HANDLE WESTERN EWES

The younger western ewes with good mouths can be handled in the same manner as native sheep. The "broken mouths" and "gummers" should be run in smaller flocks, and should be kept separate from the younger sheep. They may require more palatable feed than the younger sheep.

When western sheep are received on the farm, check them for both internal and external parasites. Consult the seller as to information on whether they have been dipped and drenched, or if this would be advisable.

Don't turn western ewes immediately into lush legume pastures. Allow them to get their fill and become acquainted with the feed while on grass pasture. Allowing the ewes to fill on grass hay or some other lower quality roughage will prevent them from gorging themselves when they are turned onto lush pastures. Western sheep may not be used to grain; they should be accustomed to it gradually.

It is a good practice to "flush" the ewes about 2 weeks before the breeding season by turning them on good pasture, or by feeding one-half pound of grain per head daily. It is a good plan to begin



graining the ewes during the last month or so of pregnancy. Handle the ewes and lambs in the same manner as you would a flock of native sheep.

*The latest recommendations on general sheep management may be secured from your county agricultural agent or the Department of Animal Husbandry, Michigan State College.*

Cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics. Michigan State College and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating. D. B. Varner, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State College, East Lansing. Printed and distributed under Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914.

FEBRUARY 1955—15M