

Experiences with pasture lambing

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We have raised sheep on grass for 25 years and have lambled on pasture for the last 10 years. Our farm has 60 acres of pasture, half of it very sandy soil. By purchasing winter hay, we have been able to breed an average of 200 ewes and market 275-300 feeder lambs each fall plus keep 35-40 replacement ewe lambs and sell some breeding stock. I have a full time teaching job and do almost all the shepherding alone. My wife and children assist at critical times like worming and weaning. The system we use has provided substantial income for a rewarding part time job.

Why pasture lambing?

Match grass growth with nutritional needs

When we matched the nutritional needs of the ewe with the grass growth curve on our farm, it became apparent that ewes should be lactating heaviest in May and June. By lambing in May we have the highest quantity and quality of grass available to the most demanding stage of production. Without any supplemental feed to lambs or ewes we average .7 lbs lamb gain per day during this period. By weaning when grass growth slows in late summer, the ewes can be put on maintenance rations and the grass rationed for lambs and stockpiled grazing. After weaning, the lambs gain about .4 lbs per day until sold as feeders at 85-90 lbs in October or November.

Lamb more ewes with less labor and facilities

Until we started pasture lambing, we were limited to breeding 100 ewes by the size of our barn. We had plenty of grass available and made most of our own winter feed. I began to tire of the stress and labor that making hay requires. A quick push of the pencil showed that buying hay isn't much more expensive than making it. By not making hay, we could double our sheep flock, which would provide a substantial income increase. If we kept shed lambing we would have to extend our lambing season by a month. I was too worn out after one lambing to even consider another. The alternative proved to be to lamb on grass in May.

Basics of pasture lambing

Breeding

Successful pasture lambing starts in the fall. Ewes should be in good condition when the rams are introduced in December. Depending on pasture conditions, the ewes may be thin at weaning. I like to have them back up to a condition score of 3.0-3.5 by breeding. Sometimes this requires supplemental grain. We breed our ewe lambs and have found that as yearlings they always need supplemental grain before and during breeding to perform well their second lambing. It is important

to get the ewes into good condition before breeding because grain feeding later in gestation leads to large lambs, which can be a problem when lambing on pasture. It is also important to choose ram breeds for the lambs and yearlings that produce easy birthing. For us, the least problems come from ewes with twins. Singles and triplets have much higher lambing difficulties. Our crossbred ewes have a 185% lambing percentage after their first year. Ewe lambs usually have only one lamb.

Gestation

After breeding, ewes are self-fed on maintenance quality hay packaged in large round or square bales until early April. At that time, higher protein hay is fed in greater quantities until grass is ready to graze around April 20. During this time, ewes are rapidly moved across the entire farm to just “top” the newly sprouting grass. Lambing paddocks will be lightly grazed first so that they can recover for lambing. At this time the paddocks are also fertilized with 30 lbs of actual Nitrogen per acre. Sometime in late March or early April the ewes are sheared. The weekend before lambing is scheduled (May 5-10), the ewes are wormed and sorted into lambing groups. The yearlings and ewe lambs are grouped together in one paddock while the rest of the flock is divided into two groups. Each group will be given about 13 acres as a lambing paddock. These are usually divided in half so that the lambing groups can be rotated to “clean” ground after the first 2 weeks. About 20 acres will not be used for lambing. Hay will be made from this in early June. (I know, I’m not supposed to make hay, but some years the grass just grows too well!)

Lambing

Now the excitement begins. If the ewes have been selected and managed well, and the weather and predators cooperate, lambing can be a pleasant experience. I usually check the flock at sunrise and make sure everyone is doing well. Then it’s off to work until 4:30 PM. Each evening I walk through the paddocks and confront the rare problem that occurs. Then I begin processing lambs. If a lamb isn’t caught within 24 hrs, it becomes considerably more difficult to catch. As a general rule, as soon as a lamb has been licked-off and nursed, it is ready for processing. If the forecast is for windy/rainy weather within the next few hours, I will hold off for another 24 hours. I’m a number guy, so I ear tag each lamb and record maternal information. The lambs are then docked and castrated using elastrator bands. I do not treat the navels with iodine. I also spray mark the dam’s number on each lamb. A different color is used for singles, twins, and triplets. This makes it easier to match ewes and lambs should they get separated. I have found that kneeling on the ground with all the lambs held between my knees while processing is easiest. If a ewe has twins, and only one lamb is done at a time, she may move away from the lambing bed with the other lamb. Catching and releasing all her lambs at the same time seems less stressful to both mom and lambs. I use a system called set stock lambing where the ewes and lambs stay in the same group until lambing is over. I usually move each group to an adjacent paddock midway through lambing to manage grass quality.

Lactation

Lambing is mostly finished by June 1. The groups are gradually gathered into one flock during the next week. They then start a rotational system over the entire farm until weaning. I've tried weaning at 60 days, but I'm happier with lamb performance if I wait until the youngest lamb is 75–90 days old. Parasite control, grass management, and fence maintenance become the focus during this time.

Weaning

Sometime in mid-August the lambs are weaned. I try to have weaning finished before school starts. I plan the rotation so that the paddocks farthest from the barn are ready to be grazed by the weaned lambs. When the ewes and lambs are separated, the ewes stay behind woven wire on poor quality hay until they dry up. The lambs are sent to the farthest away paddocks and hardly miss a beat. Because they can't hear mom, and they know what grazing is all about, they don't show much stress. After the ewes are dried up, they are condition-scored and treated accordingly. The young and thin ewes may be grazed following the lambs or fed good quality hay depending on the growing conditions.

Dealing with problems

Pasture lambing can have mortality rates similar to or better than shed lambing. Our lamb mortality is 3-7%. If you can believe that ewes are very good at feeding and caring for their lambs and will trust them to perform unassisted, you will likely be successful with pasture lambing. If, on the other hand, you feel the need to control every situation, you should not consider pasture lambing. 90% of our flock needs no assistance in any way. The other 10% requires most of the work. Needless to say, these ewes don't stick around long, but management schemes must be in place to help them solve the immediate problem. This usually means returning them to a jug in the barn. I built a portable pen that attaches to the 3 point on my tractor to haul problem ewes back to the barn. The most common problems we experience are discussed below.

Predation

We lambed on pasture for 8 years with very few predation losses. In the ninth year we lost at least 30 lambs. Solving the problem was difficult. Last year with two guard dogs the problem was gone. The dogs, however, caused their own set of problems. Our neighbors are intolerant of loose dogs and throw deer carcasses in their back 40. The dogs enjoyed going visiting, bringing back trophies and leaving footprints. Do to some unfortunate circumstances, both dogs are now gone and we are unprotected. We will need to find more dogs, llamas or donkeys. I'm open to suggestions on this problem. If anything forces us out of pasture lambing, it will be predation.

Dystocia

Most dystocia problems can be prevented by management of nutrition and genetics, but sometimes "stuff" happens. Catching a ewe having lambing difficulties can be challenging. I use a leg crook and a border collie. If the ewe

can't be caught, I can usually coax her to the gate and walk her toward the barn. Very seldom is the ewe unable to have the lamb on her own, so waiting is a good strategy. If the ewe has a "swollen-head" lamb sticking, she needs help, but usually can't run that well and catches easily. Most of our lamb losses are from lambs that never took a breath. Some of these losses could have been prevented in a shed lambing situation, but at what cost?

Hypothermia and starvation

Sometime during May we are sure to get 24 hours of wind-driven rain at just above freezing temperatures. This is nightmare time when pasture lambing. The lambs chill before nursing and being licked dry. The ewe is often miserable and not doing her job 100% either. We have had ewes that can care for their lambs in these conditions, but young ewes and those with triplets face overwhelming odds. Some losses are inevitable, but most can be prevented. I fill a thermos with cow colostrum and tube any lambs recently born or acting hypothermic. Cold lambs are collected, warmed and fed at the house, then returned to their mom. If an entire family is at risk, I bring the ewe and her lambs to the barn to provide care. If the paddock doesn't have shelter from the wind, I throw a few straw bales out for the lambs to shelter behind. I never process lambs the night before one of these predicted storms nor during the storm. Once the weather clears I get lots of exercise catching frisky lambs.

Mismothering and insufficient milk

Mismothering can also be a problem that causes starvation. When I find an abandoned lamb, I first try to reunite him with his mom. If she accepts him, all is well. Otherwise he is brought back to the barn to await a foster mom. Hungry triplets are also brought back. If a ewe loses her lambs for any reason, she is caught and stanchioned to graft two or three of these lambs to. We rarely have orphan lambs for long. Mismothering can happen by chance encounters during parturition, but it can be influenced by genetics. A ewe doesn't get a third chance if she has 2 mismothering incidents. Having ewes in excellent condition before lambing increases milk production substantially.

Pasture lambing isn't for all shepherds, but it provides an opportunity to raise more lambs with less capital expense and labor. More management skills are needed than in conventional lambing situations where problems can be more easily dealt with. Healthy, easy-care ewes are essential, but these can come from many different breeds. Excellent parasite and grass management skills are also critical. Before switching to pasture lambing, I would advise visiting one or more shepherds that already pasture lamb. With the right knowledge and attitude, pasture lambing can be aesthetically and financially rewarding.