



Hair Sheep: No Wooling Around

Ideally suited for small-farm production, easy-care hair-sheep breeds have come a long way from their beginnings 10,000 years ago.

Courtesy Lone Star Dahl Sheep Farm

Texas Dall hair sheep are registered by the United Horned Hair Sheep Association. They are athletic, all-white, horned sheep.

If you want to keep sheep but you don't want to deal with wool, think hair sheep. Shepherds are flocking to hair sheep for many reasons, and not only because they needn't be shorn.

Other advantages of hair-sheep breeds include their increased heat tolerance, parasite and hoof-rot resistance, increased lambing percentages, and outstanding mothering ability with above-average milk production. They are fine foragers, and they breed year-round. Best of all, there's an array of attractive hair-sheep breeds to choose from, including heritage breeds like the sleek St. Croix sheep and ancient Wiltshire Horn sheep and the readily available Katahdin sheep and Dorper sheep—two of the fastest-growing sheep breeds in North America.

According to Dr. Charles E. Parker in "U.S. Sheep Inventory 2006: Some Hair Raising Statistics," between 2000 and 2005, hair-sheep breed registrations increased by 83.5 percent, while all other breeds combined declined by 14 percent. Dorsers and Katahdins alone accounted for 15.6 percent of total sheep-breed registrations. Hair-sheep production, he adds, represents the only continuous growth segment in the U.S. sheep industry for 18 years.

Hair Sheep 101

Hair sheep fall into one of two categories: unimproved (true hair sheep) or improved (shedding) breeds. True hair sheep are sheep as nature intended them to be. The ancestors of today's sheep were wild Mouflons domesticated in Asia's Fertile Crescent more than 8,000 years ago (though an unknown ancestor played its part, as well). They, like early domestic sheep, were clothed with hair, not wool. They grew woolly winter undercoats to stay warm.

Humans, however, selectively bred the sheep for wooliness to the degree that by 3000 B.C., wool sheep were evident in parts of the ancient world. As woolly sheep evolved, their tails grew longer and woollier, requiring docking (shortening) for hygienic reasons; rams lost their impressive manes of hair and, in many wool breeds, their horns.

Some types evolved in parts of the world where heat and humidity made wool coats impractical, such as sultry West Africa and, later, the Caribbean. They kept the hair, manes, horns and short tails of their wild ancestors, and from them emerged breeds like today's Barbados Blackbelly and St. Croix.

During the mid- to late-20th century, wise sheep developers crossed true hair sheep with wool sheep to create larger, meatier, faster-maturing, shedding breeds like Dorsers and Katahdins. These sheep grow woolly winter coats but shed them by June or July.

Courtesy Corrine Adkins

American Blackbellies are true hair sheep with impressive horns.

At the same time, ranchers bred European Mouflons to an assortment of horned wool breeds, including Rambouillet, Merino, Navajo-Churro and Jacob sheep, to create an array of horned hair sheep breeds like Barbados, Texas Dalls, Black Hawaiians and Painted Desert sheep. Primarily used for trophy hunts, these sheep breeds are also a productive source of mild-tasting lamb, striking hair-on pelts and massive horns of great beauty.

Hair sheep are, first and foremost, meat sheep. Ideally suited to low-input production systems, hair sheep lambs yield lean, delicate-flavored meat with none of the "muttony" flavor. Because their tails needn't be docked and many producers choose not to castrate male lambs, they are favorites with Halal (Muslim food market) buyers who tend to favor unblemished ram lambs tipping the scale at 60 to 90 pounds live weight. Parasite resistance equates with reduced use of deworming agents, making hair sheep favorites with organic and grassfed lamb producers, as well.

Another potential market exists for hair-sheep leather. Free of the blemishes caused by the wool follicles in everyday sheepskin, hair-sheep leather is soft, strong and elastic and in such high demand that American leather companies import roughly 1 million hair-sheep hides each year. Companies manufacturing products for the United States Department of Defense alone import about 250,000 raw hides per annum to produce portions of gloves, fighter-pilot helmets and seat



upholstery. American hair-sheep producers could instead supply that need.

And thanks to a propensity to browse weeds and woody herbage as well as graze grass, beautiful, easy-care hair sheep are among the finest organic lawn mowers.

Although complete coverage of every hair-sheep breed in North America is beyond the scope of this article, here are some basics to whet your appetite, based on each breed's respective registry.

Barbados Blackbelly and American Blackbelly

In 1904, the United States Department of Agriculture imported four yearling Barbados Blackbelly ewes and one ram from Barbados. It was the only official importation from Barbados; although, additional imports may have followed, including one as recent as the 1970s.

The Barbados Blackbelly is listed as Recovering on the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy's Conservation Priority List. Barbados Blackbellies registered with the Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association International are never horned; small, loose scurs (rudimentary horn-like growths on the skin) are, however, allowed in rams.

American Blackbelly sheep are an impressively horned breed registered by the BBSAI, created by combining Barbados Blackbelly, Mouflon and horned wool-sheep genetics. Both horned and polled Blackbelly rams and polled ewes can be registered with the North American Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Registry. Barbados and American Blackbellies are true hair sheep.

They come in colors ranging from the palest fawn to rich mahogany red with black under parts and facial markings. Ewes weigh 75 to 95 pounds; rams average 110 to 140 pounds. They are alert, elegant, deer-like animals and fairly energetic. Both breeds produce lean, fine-textured gourmet lamb and are favorites with herding-dog trainers. Ewes are highly prolific, averaging twins (or better) each year.