



Management Basics for Sheep Owners

Sheep are not complicated to raise, but there are some basic tips to help sheep owners keep their flocks happy and healthy.

This article contains excerpts from "Sheep Management 101" by Cherie Langlois, sheep owner and Hobby Farms contributing editor. It first appeared in Popular Farming Series: Sheep, a publication with in-depth information for those who own or would like to own sheep. Buy one online or call (800) PET-BOOK (738-2665). If you're a new sheep owner with a brand-new flock--or if you already have sheep on your farm--you want to do everything right:

Feed your flocks a balanced diet

Shelter your sheep from nasty weather

Capture and handle your sheep with care

Care for your flock's health: vaccinations, parasite control and hoof care

Provide proper pre-lambing care

Watch out for horns!

"Sometimes," says Robert Rutherford, a sheep specialist and professor at California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, "the more care we give sheep, the more harm we can do them ... we can become so intent on caring for them, it's easy to forget they've lived on wild moors, mountains and rangelands with minimal attention from humans for thousands of years."

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An general overview of basic sheep management:

Feed Your Flocks a Balanced Diet

As ruminants, sheep have a large stomach chamber--a fermentation and storage organ called the rumen. Ruminants have billions of helpful protozoa and bacteria residing in their rumen that flourish on a high-fiber diet. Further digestion occurs in the abomasum, or true stomach, which secretes acids and enzymes similar to the human stomach.

"In reality, you're not feeding the sheep, but feeding the microbes that live in the gut," says Rutherford. "Ruminants can only function if their rumen organisms are working well."

The basic components of a healthy sheep diet include the following:

Water: Since sheep take in moisture with the plants they eat, animals maintained on a diet of dry hay and grain will also drink more water.

Forage: Sheep prefer forbs--broad-leaved "weeds" that include clover and alfalfa--but they also dine on grass and shrubs like blackberries and multiflora rose, as well as timothy, brome grass and birdsfoot trefoil.

Grain: Sometimes sheep need the extra energy and protein that grains supply, such as during an ewe's late gestation.



Vitamins and Minerals: Feed stores carry supplements in block and loose form, but before purchasing a sheep-specific vitamin or mineral supplement, ask your local extension agent or your veterinarian what deficiencies occur in your area.

Note: Feed your sheep at about the same time each morning and evening; avoid upsetting the rumen with sudden changes in type or amount of feed, and never serve moldy grain or hay.

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Shelter Your Sheep from Nasty Weather

In general, adult sheep can cope with many types of weather thanks to their insulating coats of wool, but offer shelter to give them a place to:

Take shelter from downpours, Dry out when wet, and Escape the wind and scorching sun.

Lambs in particular become easily chilled during foul weather. Consider preserving a stall in a barn for your sheep--or try simple, three-sided shelters, port-a-huts and hoop houses. The shelter will need soft bedding to absorb urine and to give your sheep a comfy place to rest and ruminate.

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Handle and Capture Your Sheep with Care

Because sheep can become easily stressed, herding, capturing and handling techniques help keep a flock's anxiety level down and reduce the chance of injury. Consider the following: A well-trained herding dog can help control their movements. Give sheep time to adjust from light to dark when entering an unlit barn or a potentially scary situation. An old-fashioned shepherd's crook or other long pole can help with herding. Reward sheep with something they really love (like molasses-laced grain) when they go into their shelter for the night--take time to befriend your flock with treats and gentle scratches on the chest to make catching and handling them easier.

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Vaccinations

Always consult with your veterinarian first to find out what diseases typically occur in your areas. A common vaccination: a subcutaneous injection (an injection under the skin) of Covexin 8 or CD & T to protect against the clostridial diseases and tetanus.

Ask your veterinarian or an experienced sheep raiser to show you the proper technique if you've never given a vaccination before.

Parasite Control

Internal and external parasites can be combated with a variety of drenches, pastes, boluses, injections, sprays and pour-ons. It's smart to practice alternative methods of control such as good pasture management and rotational grazing, and only treat your sheep for internal parasites when you identify a problem. Consult your veterinarian and reference materials, such as Popular Farming Series: Sheep, for guidance.

Hoof Care

Sheep hooves grow constantly and, if not worn down through daily activities, will need trimming to keep them from growing long enough to cause lameness.

As with administering vaccinations, let a pro show you the correct technique. Be sure to wear leather gloves, eye protection and appropriate clothing to shield you from kicks and slips with the trimmers. Using a good, sharp pair of trimmers pointed away from your body, trim turned-over side flaps and carefully pare down long toes to give the hoof an even surface. Don't cut too much at once to avoid cutting the hoof into the quick. If you do draw blood, a liberal application of styptic powder should staunch the flow.

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Provide Proper Pre-lambing Care

One of the times an adult sheep definitely deserves special treatment is during the critical period leading up to lambing. All that fetal growth in late gestation demands a lot of energy, which means the ewe will need to be on an increasing plane



of nutrition without becoming overly fat. Her water requirements will also increase and she should get plenty of exercise, as well.

For an in-depth discussion of late gestation nutrition and pregnant-ewe care, read *Managing Your Ewe and Her Newborn Lambs* by Laura Lawson (TDF Publishing, 1997).

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Watch Out for Horns!

Horned sheep are lovely, but keep the following in mind when caring for them:

Be vigilant and cautious when working around rams. Horned heads pack even more of a punch than polled heads. Never bend over a horned sheep when feeding or doing other chores. Even friendly ewes may suddenly rear up, clipping you in the face. Horns can be caught on fences, feeders and stanchions. Choose your equipment carefully. Broken horns bleed profusely. Don't hesitate to call your vet for advice, but in our experience, broken horns soon stop bleeding on their own (you can also apply styptic powder to help cease the bleeding) and seldom pose a health threat. If flies are a problem, apply a fly-repellant ointment. Watch horn growth. A horn pressing too close to a sheep's face or curling into its jaw may need to be cut.

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