

Brief Guide to Market Lambs

Carol Hamilton, Spartanburg County 4-H Youth Development Agent



Lamb Selection

There are several factors to consider when selecting your market lamb project animal. The breed, size, quality, cost, and personal goals should all be considered when making your purchase.

Breed: There are many acceptable breeds of sheep that can be exhibited as market lambs. Some of the most common meat breeds are Suffolk, Hampshire, Texel, Dorset, Southdown and Crossbred. You are not limited to these breeds, but it is important to consider the breed characteristics when choosing a market lamb.

Characteristics to look for include structural correctness, muscle, volume and capacity, rate of gain, and potential size. For example, heritage breeds do not typically have the desired genetic makeup for a market lamb project.

Age of lamb: When selecting a market lamb for show it is important to consider the age of the animal. Most market lambs will be exhibited when they are 6 to 12 months old. This means if you intend to show in the fall, you should purchase a spring lamb. It is also important to be aware of any weight requirements a show may have. The ideal show weight of a market lamb will be between 115-140 lbs. Market lambs should weigh at least 100lbs at the time of the show.

Cost: Prices for market lambs also referred to as club lambs can range drastically from \$150 on up into the thousands. A high-priced market animal is no guarantee to win grand champion. Winning is a combination of good genetics, proper nutrition, animal husbandry, and showmanship. So choose an animal that makes good financial sense, while also considering the other costs you may have throughout your project. You may need to visit several farms or auctions to find the animal that fits your budget and has the desired show qualities.

Personal show goals: Setting personal project goals before you purchase an animal is important to your success. If you are a beginner your goals may be to learn proper animal husbandry and nutrition your first year or two and not be as concerned with the grand champion title. As you advance in your project your goals may include and increased number of animals and placing at the top of your show classes. These goals are personal to you and should help direct your project work. Your 4-H agent or project leader can help you set goals and make action plans to accomplish these goals.

Facilities

Shelter: Facilities for your project lambs need to be well-ventilated, dry and clean with adequate indoor and outdoor space. You will need a minimum of 10 square ft. of covered barn space and a minimum of 20-25 square ft. dry lot space for your animal to exercise and have access to fresh air.³ Your pens should be constructed from smooth wire or

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crosshatched panels that serve both as a barrier to keep sheep in and predators out. Barbed wire or electric fences allows sheep to escape easily and sustain serious injuries.

Your indoor space doesn't need to have concrete floors, but it does need to have bedding that keeps the animals comfortable, clean, and dry. Wood shavings are recommended to prevent "hay belly" which occurs when a lamb eats straw or crop residue bedding.

Water: Access to clean fresh water is essential. A lamb will drink 2-4 quarts of water per day, more in high heat. If you are watering from a bucket you should change the water twice per day.³

Feeding: You will need a feeding trough and hay rack for your lamb project. These can be purchased at your local livestock supply store or you can construct your own ([see plans](#)).

Nutrition

Proper nutrition for your market lamb is essential for the animal's growth and production. There are nutrient categories when it comes to feeding your animal. Water, Proteins, Carbohydrates, Minerals and Vitamins. As previously mentioned, your animals should always have access to clean fresh water. Lamb nutrition changes throughout the animal's life. In earlier development stages the lamb needs a higher protein ration to develop the central nervous system, muscles and organs. As the lamb transitions to growing the lamb less protein is needed and more carbohydrates (energy) is required. There are lots of great lamb nutrition resources available, including your local extension livestock agents.

Health

There are several common diseases and health problems lambs could encounter. It is important to have a relationship with a veterinarian before your animal gets sick. If you notice unusual behavior from your lamb, you should isolate the sick animal from the rest of the herd. Call your veterinarian for an accurate diagnosis and treat according to their recommendation. Sheep are susceptible to overeating, external parasites, foot rot, internal parasites, coccidiosis, pneumonia, sore mouth, urinary calculi, and club lamb fungus.³ Learning about these common diseases can help you quickly identify them if your lamb presents symptoms.

Resources

1. Missildine, J. (2008). *Lamb Guide*. Nebraska Extension Publications. Retrieved from <https://extension.unl.edu/statewide/antelope/Lamb%20Guide.pdf>
2. Opatik, A., & Thomas, D. (2008). *University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension*. Retrieved from http://www.ansci.wisc.edu/Extension-New%20copy/sheep/Publications_and_Proceedings/fact%20sheets/Small%20farms%20sheep%20fact%20sheet%20WI.pdf
3. The Ohio State University Cooperative Extension. (2015). *Sheep Resource Handbook*. Columbus, Ohio.
4. Thelen, J. (2017). *Planning for your 4-H sheep project animal: Estimating costs*. Michigan State University. Retrieved from https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/planning_for_your_4_h_sheep_project_animal_estimating_costs

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