

BEGINNERS GUIDE:

GETTING STARTED with sheep



Abbagail @ Sage & Shepherd Farm

Welcome

I was a shepherd for halloween when I was 6, it's almost like it was meant to be. I didn't dream about having sheep since I was 6, but ever since having them they've become my favourite animal. Everything they say about sheep is true! They're skittish, docile, and stick together, but they're also friendly, loveable, and super fun to be around.

On the surface caring for sheep looks easy, and while it is for the most part, sometimes they require more work than chickens. There are many more diseases and parasites for them to get, you have to make sure you have the right breed for the right conditions, and you have to check their health regularly. But when you see their happy faces with a mouthful of fresh, new grass it's all worth it.

There is lots to take into consideration when getting started with sheep, but I got you! I've created this beginners guide for you, to help you get a head start! I think goats have taken 'most popular' for homestead animals, but sheep are just as great, plus they're easier to contain.

Let's get started, shall we?

-abbigail

IN CASE YOU DIDN'T KNOW: sheep terms

SHEEP

general term,
it's already a
plural for a flock
of sheep

LAMB

baby sheep,
under 1 year

EWE

female sheep in
childbearing years,
over 1 year



EWE LAMB

baby female sheep,
under 1 year



RAM / BUCK

male sheep that's
ready for some fun,
if you know what I
mean, over 1 year

RAM LAMB

baby male sheep,
under 1 year

YEARLING

1 or 2-year-old lamb
that has not
produced offspring



LAMBING

the term used for the
verb of giving birth



Breed & Need

1

It's like choosing a breed of dog for your family - it's an important choice! You need to know what your reasons are for getting sheep before you get them. Do you want meat? Milk? Wool? All three? Also consider the size of the breed, foraging capabilities, and your climate. There are breeds that excel in each of these things which makes choosing easier.

With all this considered, if you're just starting out you'll want to start easy. We have Katahdins, which are great for meat, and are low maintenance because you don't have to shear hair sheep! Doing all three things is much more of a chore, so make sure you're ready; although milking can always be optional. On the other hand, it is nice to have one animal that can do so many things.



2

Fencing

Containing your animals is another important consideration. Fencing is dependent on a bunch of things: what you currently have, your budget, if you are leasing or buying land, type of sheep, grazing method, etc.

For instance, if you are just trying sheep out and don't want to build a permanent fence, get mobile electric netting. You can move it anywhere you want and it is easily added to and transported. This also works well if you are renting land.

The best option is something with small holes/gaps. Board fencing is tough because the gaps are so large and it is easy for lambs to get out and predators to get in, plus lumber is expensive. If you have board fencing already, it's a good idea to put up either cattle panel or a roll of galvanized sheep/goat fence to cover the gaps.

The other thing to consider when designing your fence layout, and your grazing method (see #3). This is crucial for the health of your sheep.

TYPES OF FENCING

	STURDINESS	PREDATOR PROOF	EASE OF INSTALL	COST
MOBILE ELECTRIC	3	4	4	\$\$\$
BOARD FENCING	5	2	2	\$\$\$\$\$
CATTLE PANEL/ GALVANIZED ROLL	5	4	3	\$\$\$\$
HIGH TENSILE/ POLY BRAID	5	4	3	\$\$\$

3

Grazing Method

This is super important for the health of your animals; the amount of time they spend in the same pasture vs the amount of new pasture they get directly correlates to their parasite load. If you are running the sheep in the same pasture their whole life, they are constantly eating their own manure, not letting the grass grow back properly, and recirculating parasites.

There are many suggestions as to how many sheep you can have per acre, some say 2, some say 12 (which is crazy)! We have about 3-4 sheep per acre, but think about lambing season because you will need more pasture for the lambs. It is best to wait a minimum of 30 days before putting your sheep back onto the same pasture they've previously been on. This allows the parasites to die, and the grass to grow back properly. Don't let them stay in one spot too long because they will kill the grass completely from overgrazing.

MAIN TYPES OF GRAZING

MANAGEMENT INTENSIVE GRAZING

This is what we practice, we move our sheep to new pasture every 4-7 days. We use mobile electric fencing. We move them when they are simply finished the grass, this results in an even distribution of manure, and all the grass getting mowed down, and not leaving any undesirables. This is also beneficial for lowering risk of parasites and keeping healthy pasture.

CONTINUOUS GRAZING

Also known as one pasture system. This means that sheep are only within one pasture. This results in the sheep becoming picky about what they eat, leaving certain weeds, and large areas of manure not spread out. This also, does not give the pasture time to regenerate, leaving dead grass and increased risk of parasites.

ROTAIONAL GRAZING

A mix between the 2 above. Not moved as often as intensive grazing, and less space than continuous grazing, a good compromise. This happens within your one pasture, people usually fence off sections and move them around there for the season.

4

Shelter

For the most part, sheep are pretty hardy during the winter, but it is recommended to give them something that is 3 sided and protects from wind, rain and snow. Even in the spring there is lots of rain, and in the summer a need for shade. Make sure your structure is sound, sturdy, and enclosed enough for adequate protection, yet open enough for adequate ventilation.

Another thing that most people don't think of is the benefit of having your structure mobile!! Often overlooked, but super convenient. Especially if your rotational grazing, you're going to want your structure to move with the sheep.

Sometimes people use Shelterlogic carports for structures as they're light and easy to move. We made ours out of cattle panel, wood, and a tarp. Be sure to use pressure treated wood, as it will last longer since the wood sits on the ground.



5

Supplements

There is so much to write about supplements, but I will keep it short and sweet, and just the basics because this could be a book in itself!

The most important mineral is selenium salt. It's a good idea to get a professional soil test done to see what you might be deficient in. The most common deficiency tends to be selenium.

Another thing to note is to be sure to cover your minerals from the rain and snow. The sheep won't eat it as much if its moist. We use small hook over bucket feeders placed under the structure and a DIY PVC pipe feeder.



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ABOUT

Sage & Shepherd Farm

We're Abbagail & Mackenzie, the husband and wife duo running the farm and those are our 2 dogs Aslan & Levi.

We started this journey with a few chickens for ourselves, and fell in love with the ability to control where our food comes from and the act of farming itself. Since then, our operation has expanded greatly. We sell direct to customers, at farmers markets, to restaurants and small grocers, and ship across Ontario.

We practice regenerative agriculture methods, which build top soil, sequester carbon, and create polycultures. We want to share the message of regenerative ag, and want to inspire and help people who want to opt out of normal living!

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