



sheep



what are they?

They're 4-legged grazing ruminants - i.e they have a rumen (part of the digestive tract) that contains bacteria that breaks down cellulose in plant material. They were first domesticated from the wild mouflon around 10,000 years ago in the Middle East and symbolise the beginning of settled agriculture. Initially, sheep were like goats - hairy rather than woolly. From 2000 BCE there is evidence of spinning. Sheep (or at least sheep owners) were the enemy of farm labourers during the enclosures, when hundreds of sheep could be managed by a few men and dogs. The surplus folk were unceremoniously turfed off the land, usually from poverty to ruination.

They do well in cooler climates. Some breeds (like the Blackface) can be extremely hardy and range over sparse land that could hardly sustain any other type of farm animal, whilst others (like the Suffolk) prefer lush lowland meadows.

Sheep today are broadly split into three categories: primitive breeds, which tend to be agile, wiry creatures with a physique similar to goats; more developed breeds that have been bred for their meat, wool (or both) or their environment; and commercial breeds that have been bred to put on weight rapidly.

Their main food is grass – this can be in the form of hay, which can be stored and used in winter. Sheep alternate between grazing and resting to ruminate (chew the cud) during the day. Leaving them out in a field with access to grass, water and some shelter from the worst of the weather meets most of their requirements. However, much of the lamb sold today is from sheep that have not been allowed to graze naturally. Make sure the lamb you buy is certified pasture-fed.



Blanket made from hand-spun, home-reared sheep's wool.



Feeding oats to a small flock of Jacob sheep in winter.

what are the benefits?

Nowadays, sheep are kept primarily for meat, but if you're a smallholder, the quality of the wool could also be important. Wool can be cleaned and used for insulation, stuffing cushions and duvets etc. It can also be teased out into primitive rugs, felted into cloth or spun, woven or knitted into clothes. A commercial ram (e.g. a Charollais or Texel) bred with a local ewe such as Suffolk or Dorset Horn will generally produce a good butcher's lamb, as well as a decent fleece.

Some breeds produce better wool than others. A long staple can be difficult to hand spin - but if you have a number of fleeces they can be bundled up and sent to be spun at mill. Jacob sheep, with a mixed brown and cream/white fleece, provide wool that's easy to card and spin. The best wool comes from sheep that have not been pregnant. Pregnancy puts a strain on the ewe's body and creates a break in the wool. Most sheep are sheared at the beginning of summer, while lambs can be sheared at the beginning of autumn. Lambs' wool is short but beautiful.

A by-product of meat production is skins. You could learn to prepare your own sheepskin, or there are companies that will do it for you.

Sheep can be milked – although they would need a higher nutritional input and continuous condition checking. Interestingly, more sheep than cows are kept for milk worldwide.

They crop grass closely and will eat weeds despised by other animals. So if you have a fenced-in plot of land, a few sheep will stop it getting overgrown. They're flock animals though, so you need more than one. They can be used for grazing stubble in arable fields, or in orchards - in both cases, they'll fertilise the land too; and they can be used for conservation grazing, stopping scrub growth and keeping grass at a height for butterflies to lay eggs etc.

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what can I do?

Getting started: attend a course and read as much as you can. If you know a local sheep farmer who needs a hand, you'll learn a lot, and you might get help in return later. Most importantly, learn about the various problems, diseases and pests that can affect sheep.

You need around half a hectare for every 2 or 3 ewes, plus a holding number for your land and a flock number for your sheep (from DEFRA in the UK). A shed for various jobs will be handy, but the sheep don't necessarily need it. The land needs to be fenced, but be careful with electric fences as horned breeds can get caught. Sheep get on with other animals, and can be kept alongside them.

Buy sheep via ads in the agricultural press, or at auction - take someone with experience. Sheep will be different prices depending on age and breed. The government requires records of sheep numbers, chemicals administered and when, births, deaths and movements.

You'll need some hurdles to catch and hold your sheep, a foot-trimmer, plus needles and syringes for vaccinations (you'll need training in this first).

Transporting: movements must be reported to your local animal movement officer. When you move animals onto your land, other animals (sheep, pigs, cattle or goats) will be subject to a 'standstill' period - a no. of days that they can't be moved from your holding. Search online for guidelines, as it changes. Moving sheep off your land affects the destination, not departure holding. You must use a suitable vehicle, which must be cleaned after use. This can be a bought or homemade trailer, estate car or truck.

Care: sheep need preparing for tugging (mating), lambing, worming, vaccinating, and shearing. If you can't do these things yourself, keeping sheep will be inconvenient and expensive! Shearing is a skill you can learn, so that you can turn your sheep, get their wool off and rolled for spinning, treat them for diseases and parasites and check that their hoofs are healthy and not overgrown.

You can sell your fleeces directly to craft shops and spinning guilds, or use them yourself. Making a blanket or jumper with wool from your own sheep is incredibly satisfying.

As long as your sheep are healthy you can more or less leave them alone, apart from a quick daily check. If you plan for the year, work to avoid



Shearing.

problems and prepare for big events, then mainly all will go well. When you know your flock, you'll quickly notice when something is wrong.

Lambing: is not for the faint-hearted. Ewes who birth badly, reject their lambs or suffer a prolapsed uterus could be given a second chance, or culled if you don't want a second vet's bill. Vets can quickly get expensive. Go on a lambing course and decide if you have the stomach to deliver a dead lamb or tube feed a failing one at 3am. Ewe lambs can add to your flock; ram lambs, with a bit of skill, you can castrate and keep until at least the autumn. Lambs are a way to get a bit of money back so that even a small flock should break even on financial outlay at the end of the year.

Slaughter: local, small abattoirs are rare, so to reduce food miles, the only option is to do it yourself. You'll need a rifle (with a licence) or a captive bolt gun (no licence required), and your sheep can be despatched whilst eating, instantly, without knowing anything about it - better than being taken in a cramped trailer to an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people, noises and smells. If everyone obtained their meat this way, it would probably mean a lot more vegetarians, and a lot less meat eaten, which is fine by us.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/sheep for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Mary Castell, *Starting with Sheep*
- Eddie Straiton, *Sheep Ailments*
- nationalsheep.org.uk - National Sheep Assoc.
- sheepkeep.co.uk - database matching sheep with grazing land
- adopt-a-sheep.com - sheep education resource

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