

California Red Sheep Produce Great Wool

California Red sheep were originally bred for meat but some lines now produce prize-winning wool as well. Elizabeth Ferraro and her son Leonard have won state wool competitions.

"We're in the fleece business and selling breeding stock," says Elizabeth Ferraro. "We breed for fleece quality and body confirmation."

The relatively new breed (selected from Tunis and Barbados crosses in the 1970's) has a reputation for lean, delicate meat produced on just hay and grass. Rams range from 225 to 250 lbs. and ewes from 130 to 150 lbs. The breed is polled, so horns aren't a problem. The fat-tailed sheep may need docking.

The wool is silky in texture and not as super fine as Merino. It has low levels of lanolin, making it easy to shear. Lambs are born red. Mature fleece has light oatmeal to faint raspberry undertones with light gold to cinnamon red hairs intermixed. The head, belly and legs have short, red hair. Ferraro says the fleece is popular with hand spinners, weavers and fiber artists.

"We sell our skirted fleece for \$21 per lb., and we have a waiting list," says Ferraro. "We will get a 3-lb. fleece from a small ewe

and as much as a 9-lb. fleece from a large ram."

Ferraro cautions prospective buyers that not all California Reds have the same quality fleece. The fleeces on her sheep have changed from coarse rug wool to finer sweater and knitting wool in the 13 years she has bred and selected for better wool. Other flocks selected for other traits may not produce as much or even a similar quality fleece. In fact, it was other traits that attracted Ferraro to California Reds.

"I was 65 when I bought my first sheep, fulfilling a life long dream to own sheep," she recalls. "I wanted a gentle sheep, easy to work with and resistant to parasites and foot rot. I've never had a problem with their feet, and at 78 years old, I can walk into the pen with my 12 rams and never worry about being hit or any hostility. All they want is to be scratched."

Ferraro also appreciated the breed's reputations as good mothers. Lack of wool on the belly makes it easy for lambs to nurse. Twins are expected, and triplets are common, though Ferraro doesn't select for that trait.

California Reds will breed out of season, and they remain productive for years. The breed is very adaptable to the weather, says



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Ferraro. A few years ago she moved her flock from New Jersey to a farm in northeast New York, not far from the Canadian border.

"They did fine in the warm and humid New Jersey climate as well as here," she adds. "Quite a few have been exported to the United Arab Emirates, and I understand they're doing well in that heat."

Ferraro advises prospective buyers to look for sheep from different bloodlines. She maintains 8 to 10 separate bloodlines.

"When people buy lambs from me for breeding, I suggest they buy 3 ewes and preferably 2 rams, each from different lines," she says. "Then they're independent and can

maintain 2 lines using one ram on the lambs of the other."

Ferraro sells ewe lambs for \$350 each and ram lambs for \$450. A yearling ram lamb sells for \$500 and a proven breeder-ram will sell for \$600.

"Groups of 5 or more receive a 10 percent discount," says Ferraro. "The buyer pays for health certificates and transportation."

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Nigora Goats Have Great Fleece, Good Milk

Cross a purebred Angora Fiber Goat (known for its excellent fleece) with a Nigerian Dwarf Dairy goat (known for its milk) and the offspring are Nigora Goats, an elegant and practical breed for small farmers and hobbyists. When Nigora goats reach 2 1/2 years old, the owner/breeder is able to certify the animal as purebred and start their own herd.

"I really enjoy the fact they produce outstanding fiber and are very good milking animals at the same time," says Patricia Chambers, one of the directors of the Nigora Goat Society. "When I first saw pictures of these animals they looked like they belonged in a painting

or sculpture because they were so dainty and beautiful," Chambers says. "Although she didn't purchase any of the animals for her own, she did breed her own Nigoras by crossing a white Angora doe with a Nigerian buck. They sold all the kids they produced for a few years until rearing an offspring they called Giselle, who they still own today. She is an outstanding milking goat and produces excellent fleece."

"Giselle has a Type B fiber that's big, fluffy and amazingly soft," says Chambers. Other offspring they've produced have soft and fine mohair-type coats or slightly coarse mohair that has a natural wave, high luster and is very soft to the touch.

Chambers says Nigora goats can produce three different types of fibers, all of which take dye well, are durable, and will shed out well if the animal isn't sheared. The animals, she says, are gentle and affectionate, but can display flighty characteristics. It's important to bond with them from birth by bottle feeding within a day after birth.

"I think the Nigora is an adaptable designer goat for a small, self-sustainable homestead," says Chambers. "The animals are easy to care for, great around children, and produce

excellent milk and fleece that has good marketability."

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Dainty and beautiful, Nigora goats are an elegant and practical breed for small farmers.

Colorful Shetland Sheep "Perfect For Small Flocks"

A sick, broken-horned Shetland sheep was the first animal on Mike and Heather Ludlam's newly purchased farm in southwest Michigan back in the early 1990's. Mike recalls Heather, a veterinarian, calling and saying she wanted to bring a sheep home that had been given to her by a client, who owned what was just the second flock of Shetland sheep in the U.S.

"Of course that sheep got lonely, so she gave us another with crooked horns," Mike Ludlam says with a laugh. "Later that year we got three nice ewes and worked to correct the horn issue. Now we run 100 of them at a time."

Once a breed that was nearly extinct, Shetland sheep now rank No. 9 in the top 10 breeds of registered sheep. Their small size, gentle personalities and great spinning wool make them appealing to small flock owners and spinners.

"These guys have so many colors and so many patterns. Lambing time is like Christmas; you don't know what you'll get," says Ludlam, who is president of the North American Shetland Sheep Association (NASSA). The group's website lists a range of 11 colors from white to fawn to dark brown as well as 30 markings with Gaelic-sounding names such as Snaelit, Bielset and Mirkface.

"My wife is a person who really enjoys the color genetics and conformation. I do the marketing of the fleece and roving," Ludlam says, explaining that while the breed has a smaller fleece it's more valuable. For example, a large commercial-type sheep can produce a 14-lb. fleece that sells for \$1.50/lb. A good 3 1/2 to 4-lb. Shetland fleece, with 2 1/2 to 9-in. long locks perfect for spinning, sells for an average of \$15/lb.

Shetland wool is among the finest of the UK breeds with a range of ultra fine for lace shawls to bulky enough for wool socks.

Because the breed originated on the rocky shores of the Shetland Islands in Scotland, they're very efficient.

"They're very easy on pasture, and they don't need good quality hay," Ludlam says, noting that some flocks are rented out for weed management. "The ewes are very hardy and good mothers."

As one of the smallest British sheep, rams average 90 to 125 lbs., and ewes weigh 75 to 100 lbs. Rams have spiral horns. Ewes are usually polled. With naturally short tails, they don't require docking, which the Ludlams appreciate.

They also like the Shetland's docile nature. "Some are like dogs and want to be petted," he says. "Little kids can show them easier than big breeds."



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The Ludlams have traveled extensively with their children showing sheep in the U.S. and Canada. Shetland sheep do well in most places, though dark-colored sheep don't do as well in hot climates.

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