

Small, Colorful Sheep Breed Catching On Fast

Shetland Sheep are one of the smallest British sheep breeds. Their numbers are expanding quickly in North America.

Although only imported into Canada in 1980 and coming to the U.S. in 1986, more than 15,000 animals have been registered with the North American Shetland Sheep Association (NASSA) in the past 6 years. Although the meat is tasty, it is the wool that attracts most breeders.

"Shetlands come in 11 colors and 31 patterns," says Sandy Powers, Fantasia Fleece Farm.

A NASSA board member, Powers describes the wool as very soft with lots of loft. She says spinners really like working with it as it doesn't scratch and works well for things like scarves worn next to the skin.

As expected from a small breed, the wool comes in small quantities. Average production of 5 lbs. of raw wool processes

down to about 2 to 3 lbs. per animal.

Shetlands are considered a primitive, or unimproved breed, since they haven't generally been selected for specific traits. If breeders do select for specific traits, in order to be registered by the NASSA, the sheep have to stay within the breed standard. It outlines a collection of varied traits, such as short tail, medium length of face with prominent nose, and small mouth.

Ewes range from 75 to 100 lbs., and rams range from 90 to 125 lbs. Shetlands are seasonal breeders that commonly produce twins when well fed.

The breed is very adaptable to the climate. Powers says breeders range from the Northern U.S. and Canada into the southeast and southwestern U.S.

Powers has run as many as 80 head at a time, though she is now down to 60. She rotates pastures and averages about 7 head per acre. Though typically raised for the wool,



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she markets weathers for meat.

"It is very mild tasting with smaller cuts," she says. "A loin cut runs about 3 oz., which is a recommended meat portion."

Although the first Shetlands imported sold for thousands of dollars each, Powers reports today's prices are significantly less.

"You can get a beautiful ewe for \$200 to \$300," she says. "A ram would be more."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Fantasia Fleece Farm, 10600 N 600 E, Roanoke, Ind. 46783 (ph 260 672-9623; spowers@shetland-sheep.org; www.shetland-sheep.org).

Rare Sheep Breed Known For Easy Lambing, Weight Gain

Clun Forest sheep have the attributes producers appreciate – easy lambing, growth and carcass quality. A native of the Welsh hills (near Clun), the breed has adapted well to many different environments in North America, says Rich Fitz, sheep owner and secretary/treasurer for the North American Clun Forest Association (NACFA).

Small in overall numbers (205 lambs registered in the U.S. in 2016), hobby farmers and small flock producers emphasize the importance of keeping the breed pure. At the same time, they sell stock to commercial producers who crossbreed Cluns in their flocks for the easy lambing trait and ability to thrive on lower quality feed.

"We have a lot of breeders (NACFA) who are new to livestock and want easy production sheep, and they don't want lambs that have to be pulled," Fitz says.

With a narrow head and short legs, lambing rarely requires human assistance. Lambs are up on their feet quickly, and ewes give lambs everything they have for fast gains.

"I find that the ewes need very little to bounce back from lambing. I have 9 and 10-year-old sheep that I put on scrubland (after weaning), and by the end of July they look like they have been on alfalfa round bales," Fitz says.

He and other producers say the medium-size sheep are easier to handle than most of the large commercial breeds. Yet, the fast-growing lambs flourish on less feed and 100-120 lb. lambs dress out at 50-60 percent. Fitz sells many lambs to an ethnic market, and customers are surprised how much mild-flavored meat they get from the stocky lambs.

Fitz says he gets consistent flavor and quality with a combination of pasture, limited grain and free-choice first cutting hay.

"In Michigan, the growing season is so variable that we err on the side of caution with feeding," he says.

He notes that Clun sheep adapt to all types of feed management with producers from Georgia to Canada. The sheep are often grass-fed on the East Coast, for example. A Colorado flock feasts on sprouted grains.

Fitz says he likes the alert appearance of the sheep with their open faces and upright ears.



Hobby farmers and small flock producers emphasize the importance of keeping the Clun Forest sheep breed pure. Only 205 lambs were registered in the U.S. last year.

They tend to hold their heads up high and are smart, he adds, alerting each other to danger. They aren't as wild as breeds like Cheviots, but tend to be more standoffish than tamer breeds.

Many producers have created markets for Clun wool, which is strong, springy and suitable for socks and outerwear.

"I do see more interest in Cluns from Midwest commercial breeders who are trying to get away from huge, tall sheep that need extra feed," Fitz says.

The price of purebred rams varies depending on the breeding program and region. On the East Coast rams from semen imported from the UK can run \$700 to \$1,000. In the Midwest prices are closer to the \$300 to \$600 range.

Check out NACFA's website for more information.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Rich Fitz, Ugly Dog's Farm, 5185 N. Washburn Rd., Davison, Mich. 48423 (ph 810 299-3417; nacfassn@gmail.com).

Cheese Production May Save Rare Canadienne Cattle

Mario Duchesne is using cheese to help revive the once common Canadienne dairy breed. Duchesne, the managing director of the Association for the Development of the Canadienne Cattle Breed in Charlevoix, Quebec, notes that there has to be an economic return if herd numbers are to increase sufficiently.

The Association's efforts are aimed at developing the breed by expanding a network of dairies producing milk to make a specialty, premium cheese.

"We introduced them here in 2007 to produce milk for a local cheesemaker interested in value-added cheese," says Duchesne. "We know they can't compete with Holsteins or other major breeds for milk production. However, they're very high in protein, which is good for cheese production."

The Canadienne cow was introduced to Quebec more than 400 years ago. Over the past 100 years it drifted across Canada,

since it was an ideal cow for small farmers. It was selected for producing on grass and forage, not grain. Duchesne describes Canadiennes as very hardy and frugal, small to medium-sized with a long life span. Average production runs about 11,000 lbs. Red or fawn-colored when young, the cattle may mature to brown and black tones as well.

"They're very mild tempered and maternal, although if threatened, they'll react strongly," he says. "The breed is very hardy and will recover from milk fever or other metabolic diseases where a Holstein won't. They are also very easy calvers, so fast and easy, there is often not time to get them to a calving pen."

Duchesne estimates that today there are fewer than 300 Canadiennes left and of them, only 50 that are purebred.

As the breed dwindles, it has become very in-bred. Duchesne hopes that growing interest in using the milk for cheese, as well as advanced genetic research, will combine to save the breed. The Association is conducting



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genetic testing of existing Canadiennes to determine the rate of inbreeding and the genetic diversity remaining.

"Once we know the genetics, we can work to restore the breed through selection," says Duchesne.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Association for the Development of the Canadienne Cattle Breed in Charlevoix,

344, 138 road, Saint-Hilarion, Quebec Canada G0A 3V0 (ph 418 457-4333; info@vachecanadienne.com; www.vachecanadienne.com) or Rare Breeds Canada, RR 1, Nesbitt, Manitoba Canada R0K 1P0 (ph 204 573-8204; rbc@rarebreedsCanada.org; www.rarebreedsCanada.org).