

From the
Premier Breeder
of British Registered
Soay Sheep



SOUTHERN OREGON SOAY SHEEP FARMS

Viewpoint

THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

Starter Flocks

by Kathie Miller

With lambing and a long, ugly winter nearly behind us, it is time to think about starter flocks.

For shepherds, this means where their sheep will go; for those who have recently discovered Soay, it will mean what to look for in a beginner's flock.

Because there are two different breeds of sheep in the US and Canada called Soay—American, a hybrid unique to North America, and British, a primitive breed from St. Kilda, Scotland—there is a lot of confusion. Prospective buyers should learn about both. Which one you choose to raise will be determined by your interest. Those who are drawn to historic livestock preservation will want British; those who want a breed for meat, wool, or to play with genetics (color, horns or type) will seek out American. The easiest way to distinguish one from the other is through their registration; if a sheep is not registered (or birth notified) with the RBST in the UK, it is not a British Soay.

No matter which of the two you choose, there will be much to consider before either selling a starter flock to a beginner or, as a beginner, before making your first purchase.

The breeder should verify the accommodations (winter shelter and protection from predators, etc.) before selling animals to a new home, and be prepared to guide new owners.

Storey's Guide to Raising Miniature Livestock is a good place for beginners to start, followed by conversations with as many breeders as possible. Find one who are comfortable working with, who will support you after the sale, day or night. Farm visits are very helpful.

There are a number of options for starter flocks. A group of four or more animals is best; less than that is rather small for such a social sheep. Single animals, even when added to an existing flock, have a difficult time adjusting and may

in breeding but need help keeping pastures down, want to raise meat, wool, or simply have as pets.

For those who are interested in saving a historic breed but do not have the facilities or time to breed themselves, British Soay weathers are great; your purchase supports breeders, and by introducing the sheep to your friends and family, you indirectly promote Soay conservation. While you may never have an interest in breeding, someone you introduce to the breed may.

For those with more experience or who are seriously interested in jumping into a breeding program, a flock consisting of a single ram, a wether, and two ewes is a good option. If you purchase ewe lambs make sure you also purchase a ram lamb, not an adult. Two



Mature wethers

never bond with the rest of their new flock. A group of four wethers (neutered males) makes an ideal starter flock for those who have no shepherding experience. (*Do not ever* begin with a group of rams—lambs or adults. Lovely-looking rams in the summer can turn into hormone-driven hooligans in the fall with the potential for serious injuries. Wethers are easy to keep and do not have the behavioral issues that rams do. They are an inexpensive and less challenging way to learn the basics of sheep-keeping. Wethers are also ideal for those who have no interest

wether lambs with two ewe lambs the first year is another way to go; then, buy a ram the following year. Two adult ewes with wether lambs and an adult ram is yet another option.

When distance is not a problem, some breeders will lend you a ram if you purchase a flock of ewes from them and agree to keep the ram for a year. A practice in the UK that has not caught on yet in the US is the sale of ewes with “lambs at foot”. With this option, where the lamb is going with its dam, you do not have to wait until it has been

See “Starter Flocks” page 2

TIP OF THE MONTH

Grow a willow bush on your property for sheep that are off their feed.

SPECIAL NOTICE

I will be traveling in the UK next month and may not have time to publish a July issue of *Viewpoint*.

The August issue will be published as usual.

~ Kathie

Viewpoint is a monthly publication of Southern Oregon Soay Sheep Farms. If you have enjoyed this issue, please subscribe (kathiem@soayfarms.com) to have each new issue emailed to you. To be removed from our mailing list, please unsubscribe (kathiem@soayfarms.com).

Visit our website: www.soayfarms.com

All advice in this newsletter has been used successfully on our farm. It is important to remember that every animal and situation is different. Before you try any of our suggestions, we urge you to consult your veterinarian.

Starter Flocks *continued from page 1*

weaned to bring the sheep home. Ideally, this is a mature ewe along with her ewe or castrated male lamb, or both. It also makes an easier adjustment for both mother and baby.

If your budget or your space is limited and you can only purchase a breeding pair, insist that the breeder also sells you one—but ideally two—wether as a companion for the ram. This way, during the spring when



Mature wether

the ram is taken away from the ewe during lambing, he will not be alone. Rams go crazy when isolated and can become a serious, de-

structive problem, bashing everything in sight. Wether companions are a simple way to avoid this problem.

If you eventually decide you want to begin a breeding program, any wethers you purchased initially will be useful to your breeding flock. If you choose not to breed, they can be sold as companions or butchered. Money spent on wethers is money well spent. 🐏

ANNUAL CALENDAR

The following is intended as a very basic sheep care calendar. As some things are done differently in the US than in the UK, we have tried to touch on both here.

JANUARY If your sheep are on pasture there will be no feed value in the grass now so hay should be available. Start to feed ewes some sugar beet pulp (nuts) or Ewe and Lamb ration (ewe nuts). Do not feed alfalfa based ewe and lamb ration or dry sugar beet pulp to males. Soaked beet pellets, however, are fine. Soak overnight or for 24 hours, two measures of pellets to three measures of water (US & UK).

JANUARY–FEBRUARY If space does not permit you to keep rams with ewes until lambing, merge rams back into their bachelor flocks.

FEBRUARY–MARCH Check the condition of older sheep which can drop weight significantly at this time of the year; supplement as necessary. Lambing begins late March (US & UK).

MARCH–JUNE Lambing season (US & UK). Castrate male lambs according to the rules and customs in your area. Seek advice from established Soay breeders.

APRIL–MAY Have fecal exam done to determine worm load; worm as needed (consult your vet for product used in your area). **Do NOT use Valbazon on pregnant ewes (US)**. Worm all adult sheep and lambs over six weeks old. Panacure can be bought in 250ml containers and is a safe wormer; DO NOT under-dose. There is a good website for wormers: www.wormers.co.uk (UK).

Protect against flystrike. Several products will protect the sheep from blowflies laying their eggs but **Crovect** is the only one that will kill live maggots or lice in the fleece. Crovect is very dangerous, especially with lambs, so treat with caution; it lasts for about 8 weeks. **Vetrazine** lasts longer, about 12 weeks, and **Clik** lasts the longest but is expensive; neither will kill maggots or lice. Crovect can be bought in 0.8 ltr containers (UK).

JUNE–JULY Vaccinate lambs at 4 week and 21-28 days later. Worm lambs with their second vaccination (US). Worm at least three times a year during the sheep's first spring to autumn and continue flystrike protection (UK).

AUGUST Take all retained fleece off adult sheep with hand sheep shears or Friskar Scissors (US) or dagging shears; check for flystrike (UK).

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER Sheep being transported across the US go to their new homes as weather cools and lambs are fully weaned (US). Make certain hay and feed is stored and ready for the winter (US & UK). Worm all stock as needed. Check feet (US & UK).

NOVEMBER Put ewes to rams (US & UK).

DECEMBER If you are not already doing so, start feeding hay as the grass growth has stopped.