

Seasonal comments: the comments below are just that, notes on flock management that I have developed over a long and varied lifetime working as a shepherd and teaching flock management. They are intended only as a guide and topic of conversation. I realise that many early lambers will already be tupp'd up, as we are, but you have to start somewhere so here goes.

Autumn is traditionally the time when the rams are turned out and the breeding cycle gets underway. There are a few things that can be done to make the following lambing season a lot simpler and successful.

1. Check the ewes 6 weeks before the rams go out, check udders for hard lumps or damage, if in doubt get a professional to check them. The udder should be soft with no lumps or disfiguration, some scarring on the teats is inevitable in older ewes but it should not be too bad or it will deter the lamb from feeding. It may become chapped, sore and infected, the ewe may refuse to let the lamb feed. Also check her feet, this is the time to get rid of any footrot. Take a look at her previous years lamb, has she milked ok and grown a good lamb or has she only managed a poor lamb and needs to be replaced. Tough, but that is sheep farming. If you don't want to get rid of her fine, but please keep her as a pet and don't expect her to keep rearing lambs. The lambs will be poor and they will eventually kill her.
2. Check out the ram. Check his kit for damage, it is too late when everything returns to the ram and the breeding season has passed. Make sure his feet are in good condition. He needs to be in good condition, not too fat, nor a bag of bones. If you are hiring a ram, try to get a good one, there are plenty out there, but don't leave it until the last minute.
3. Worming ewes and rams before tupp'ing is something that has been argued about for as long as I can remember. I prefer to worm, but we have very heavily stocked permanent pasture, to me prevention is better than a cure. Things like Liver Fluke also have to be taken into consideration. I would treat shearling ewes with a little TLC.

Turning the rams out.

1. If you are splitting your ewes and using more than one ram I suggest you have a field between them. The rams will fight each other trough a fence and wreck it. Ewes that come on heat always seem to want to stand by the fence to the next field causing a riot. The same applies to any ewe lambs or old ewes you don't want served, keep them well away.

2. Raddle your rams or use a harness. I never bothered with my big flock but we find it essential at lambing to know when each ewe is expected to lamb. It helps with feeding and management, especially if you are not there all of the time at lambing. Raddle is a lot cheaper than a harness and can be bought from Countrywide stores or most agricultural suppliers. I grew up mixing raddle with tractor engine oil, but I think cooking oil is now considered just as good and a little more environmentally friendly. Change the colour regularly and write down the dates you change it. This will help identify any ewe that returns to the ram.
3. Check your ewes everyday and write down when each ewe is served (marked), we find Cotswolds remarkably accurate as to when they are due to lamb. Yvonne works on 147 days gestation. I use a little 'tin' gadget that belonged to my farther. Both seem spot on.
4. Avoid handling your sheep or chasing them about while the rams are out, I think it helps. I can't see how unnecessary chasing round will improve things.
5. Feeding, keep plenty of food/grass in front of your sheep while the rams are with them. I like to feed some sugar beet at tuppung, I am convinced it improves our lambing average. If sheep are hungry and losing condition it will not only reduce the number of lambs conceived, it may well prevent some sheep from taking the ram altogether resulting in several barren ewes.

Once the sheep have been served keep them quiet and well fed. They don't want to get too fat over the winter, but they need to be kept fit if they are to milk well next spring. Take the rams out after 6 or 7 weeks, this way you know when lambing will be over and it avoids those cuckoo lambs that can be more trouble than they are worth.