

Preparing for Lambing

With the tugging season over, the winter should be uneventful and attention can be turned to preparing for lambing. It is well documented that a lamb's development within the womb and eventual birth weight is governed directly by the quantities of feed she receives during the final 6 weeks of gestation. However, this does not mean that the ewe can be neglected before this point and she needs to maintain a condition score of about 3.5 throughout pregnancy – it is just as important that ewes do not get too fat, as it is that they do not become too thin. Either condition can lead to lambing problems, too fat and the ewes can be prone to toxemia, too thin and the ewes will produce small weak lambs and are unlikely to milk properly. This may all sound a little frightening to the newcomer, but it is not. All it needs is a little common sense and all will be well.

Provided the ewes are fit when they get to the final six weeks of gestation this important time can pass without any stress or trauma. Depending on the time of year feeding concentrate traditionally starts six weeks before lambing. Feeding starts at around a quarter of a lb. per day and increases weekly up to 1.5 – 2 lbs. per day one week before lambing. When concentrates reach 1 lb per day we split the feed in half and feed twice a day. This helps a ewe's digestive system cope with the higher levels of feeding and keeps her energy levels more stable. Ewes in better condition can manage on the smaller amount, while the thinner ewes need the extra feed. It is vital that the ewes are kept quiet while feeding. They need plenty of trough space to avoid having to compete with each other, and the same applies to the hay racks. If the ewes are chased around, or have to fight for their food, the results will be obvious; the lambs will be twisted and tangled leading to difficult lambing and higher losses.

Kit

The list of lambing equipment can seem mind boggling, but what does the average small flock actually need to deal with most everyday emergencies?

The first thing is the phone number of a professional sheep farmer or shepherd who will offer advice, and maybe even some on-farm help. This is generally not too hard to find, and you could do a lot worse than join the Society Forum. (Email me for details.)

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When I stopped lambing 600 ewes and settled on just 5, my stress levels went through the roof. Not having all my toys to hand was frightening, but to my astonishment, not disastrous; in fact it was quite the opposite.

This is what we keep to hand and why:

Milk powder: We always seem to need some, and it keeps from year to year if needs be. The same applies to powdered colostrums. I like to give a dose of colostrum to any lamb that is a bit slow off the mark, particularly if it's a twin or triplet. (Doses vary according

to make, many are in sealed individual doses for ease of use. It is important to follow the mixing instructions as some are really difficult to mix.)

Heat lamp: We lamb early in January/February, so I hang one over the lambing pen when the lambs are born; it helps dry the lambs and goes a long way to stopping problems developing. One of the big problems with only lambing a small flock, is that the sheep are left for longer periods, allowing any problem longer to develop before help arrives. It should be remembered that lambs must have their colostrum within the first 6 hours to get the full benefit from it. Lambs soon stop looking for food if they get cold; the old fashioned method of letting them get hungry could not be more wrong.

A lamb stomach feeding tube: This is a 'must have'. Don't be frightened; follow the instructions, and you will be fine. To me this is the best thing that ever happened to lambing time. My motto is - if in doubt, feed it!

A clean feeding bottle and teat: Sometimes an otherwise healthy lamb is slow to latch onto a teat. It can be much quicker and easier to milk the ewe and feed the newly born lamb from the bottle. Alternatively - if a ewe has a single lamb and a full udder, any spare colostrum can be used to feed another lamb – or freeze it for use later in the lambing season, or even the following season. A word of caution here as lambs are not daft, they quickly learn to feed from a bottle, it can be the devil of a job to get them back suckling from the ewe

Elastrator pliers and rings: This is a bit tough, but don't think you are doing the lambs a favour by not docking them – if you don't, you will roo the day when the flies are attacking the lambs in the summer. However it is best to let the lambs bond with their mothers and be feeding well before doing this – but remember that legally docking/castration must be carried out before the lambs are seven days old. Get help before castrating ram lambs; this can go horribly wrong if not carried out correctly. I know there is lots of debate about castrating ram lambs, but if you don't like him or want him. It is foolish to think any one else will.

Antibiotics: This is a thorny subject, I like some to hand, but you do need to know when and how to administer them. A word with your vet beforehand is time well spent.

Iodine: Vital for dressing the lambs' navel. This is a job that needs to be done when the lambs are born or as soon as you can afterwards. It is basic hygiene, maybe not so important if lambing outside in good dry weather, but a must if lambing inside or in the wet. Incidentally, we find a purple foot rot spray is just as good as iodine.

Clean straw: If you are lambing inside you will need plenty of clean straw for bedding. Clean lambing pens are vital, I do not worry about cleaning out between sheep but I do keep plenty of clean straw under them.

Post-lambing feeding: Our ewes get up to 2 lbs per day before lambing, but when the ewes are over lambing I gradually step up the feed to 3 possibly 4 lbs per day.

Remember we lamb early so we don't have any grass to turn the ewes onto, but 4 lbs is a lot and needs feeding with care.

Ear tags and pliers. With our small flock I like to leave the lambs until they are a couple of weeks old before I tag them, but leaving them until summer is a recipe for disaster. I could get all technical and go on about the presence of flies and the greater risk of infection. This is all very true but the reality is that by the time you have weaned the lambs you will have forgotten who had who and doing your registrations will be impossible. Tagging regulations are due to change so you will need to check the current regulations.

HeptavacP+ is often talked about, I don't bother as with a small flock it hardly seems worth it, but I would use it with a larger flock or if we lived in an area that was heavily stocked with sheep.

General: If the sheep have any foot problems it is a good idea to sort them out after lambing and before they are turned out - don't try before lambing, even if you don't turn the ewe, you will run the risk of her aborting.

Worming can also be worth doing before turn out. Crutching the ewes 6 weeks prior to lambing helps you spot when lambing begins.

It is well worth discussing lambing beforehand with a shepherd so you will have an idea of what to look out for, but ask any shepherd what the first signs of lambing are and most will smile and say 'lamb found with ewe'. This begs the question, what was all the fuss about?

Further information regarding all aspects of lambing can be found in a wide range of books and there are one day lambing courses run at many centres around the country.

Good luck!