



Notes on Shearing and Maintaining the Quality of Fleece

About Fleece

1. Normally, the best wool is lamb's wool. But lambs can usually only be shorn in their first year if you are prepared to have the shearer back in September or October. Next best is the wool from shearlings, then from young or barren ewes. Quite elderly animals can supply very good fleece as quality is governed as much by genes and health status as by age. Unless lambs are shorn in the autumn, the fleece will be too short - it needs to be at least 2" long for our processing.
2. Longwool sheep are best shorn twice a year. Any fleece that is fine risks matting and felting on the animal, which makes it impossible to process. Highly matted or felted fleeces are rubbish and should be composted or used to mulch trees. Two shearings a year will produce a higher total weight and better quality of fleece.
3. Winter shearing with winter combs - possibly before housing or lambing - is becoming more frequent and the quality of fleece is likely to be higher in ewes than the summer shearing as they will not have just had lambs and finished lactating. A sheep will put on an inch of fleece in the first month after shearing and hardier breeds can be shorn in December, fed a bit extra (likely if in lamb anyway), given access to shelter in poor weather and be well covered before the real cold in January and February.
4. Although genetics provide the basic quality, fleece quality also reflects the health of the animal. Thus stress like lambing, lactating, worms and foot-rot will also affect the wool quality. The worst cases can include the sheep simply losing the fleece, but more normally there can be staple breaks, tender wool that just breaks if pulled, or generally lower weight, crimp and quality.
5. It is vital for us that you do not include fleece that has been treated with pesticides. Fleece from animals treated for flystrike, or with other external poisons before shearing (unusual, but occasionally done if early hot weather brings flies), should also be excluded from the wool sacks. The normal rule is that fleece is not acceptable unless there is a minimum of three months between treatment and shearing. Thus using a dip or pour-on a couple of weeks after summer shearing will mean the ewes' fleeces will be fine for a winter shearing, if done, but any lambs' fleeces must be shorn in the autumn after allowing for these dates.
6. Avoid graffiti art: crayon from raddles will wash out in processing, but most of the other markers, and particularly those associated with pesticides, will not. Spraying a large number on the flank ruins 50% of the best fibre on the animal: instead consider marking the heads or the haunches.



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At Shearing

1. These notes are aimed at working within the normal constraints of shearing a large flock.
2. Unless you have plenty of experience, do not be tempted to shear your own flock: a good shearer will ensure the best welfare and the least poor quality.
3. Make sure you provide enough support and facilities for shearing, whether you do it yourself or have shearers in.
4. At shearing, ensure that the minimum of straw, hay, stubble or vegetation is present, either on the animals or in the shearing area.
5. Sort the flock as it goes for shearing - keep all rams, ewes and shearlings separated, it will make life easier. Ideally, sweep the shearing board between shearing each animal, particularly if colours vary.
6. Keep three or more wooolsacks on the go: one for rubbish, one for really good fleeces and one for average fleeces (rams will normally be below average, as will older ewes, so the ideal would be to have two average bags, one for better and one for less good). Always keep coloured wool separate from white. If there are one or two really special fleeces (which is usual), keep them to sell to hand-spinners.
7. Do not include belly and crutch wool with the fleeces - either throw it away, compost it or put in the rubbish fleece sack.
8. If possible, when there is coarse wool on the back end of the sheep, pull the fleece in two and put the coarse stuff in the rubbish sack.
9. The BWMB do not sort fleece, they only grade it on the average for the whole fleece or the whole sack. Others sort each fleece to get the best quality - one ram fleece amongst shearlings could risk ruining a batch of yarn and the price you get for your clip.
10. Shake out fleeces to reduce the amount of second cuts (which are useless because they are too short). Shearers tend to think they are making a good-looking sheep, and will go over longer bits again, but this actually reduces fleece quality: a sheep with an uneven hairdo is unlikely to complain, but your fleece customer will!
11. Mark the sacks with the different qualities; even the BWMB will pay more for quality.
12. Although the BWMB likes fleeces rolled (to take up less space), other local buyers much prefer fleeces which have not been rolled. Do not include dags, brambles, branches, stones or bricks as they are no use for making yarn and reduce the value of your clip. Baler twine bits should be avoided at all costs as they are almost impossible to remove and totally ruin the value of the fleece. You can use clean new baler twine to sew up bags, but this may be risky if sacks are later cut open in several places, which risks contamination.
13. Keep notes of the tag numbers of sheep with particularly good or particularly bad fleeces and include this information when selecting for future breeding and flock management.



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Prices

1. If you think fleece is a nuisance and only a welfare issue, it will be a problem. At the very least, you should aim for the value of the fleece to cover the shearing costs. In other words you will have a welfare activity that costs nothing.
2. Wool is a high performance, sustainable fibre, which can fetch good prices in its final form, but the transport, processing, design and marketing are all expensive and take time - a really good handspinner will take an hour to spin 100 yards of yarn, which has to be plied. Working by hand, from raw fleece to a hand-spun, hand-knitted pullover (without dyeing) will take an efficient and competent person around 100 hours. Machines are obviously quicker, but need power, premises, employees and bureaucracy. None of this can begin without good fibre to start with and these notes should help you to get the best value from your fleece.
3. It generally costs around £1 per animal to shear sheep (more for goats and around £15 for alpaca) and the weight of fleece produced is generally 2-10 kilos, depending on the breed. A long matted heavy fleece may weigh plenty, but it will not get as good a price as a clean, shorter one.
4. BWMB prices set the norms, so you should never get less. The board makes two payments, so if you can get all the money up front, and are working for the longer term, you can afford to accept the same price from another buyer (especially if they collect).
5. The BWMB accepts that they are not the best market for all fleece, but does like to keep statistics on the total wool clip. Therefore it is worth informing them if you keep fleece to sell elsewhere. The board supports local value-adding initiatives and prefers wool to be used rather than wasted.
6. A really good fleece can be sold for up to £5-10 a kilo for hand-spinning; rare breeds can fetch even more. This will pay for up to 10 other animals to be shorn.
7. Shearers will know about local buyers and spinners and a great deal more besides - it is worth asking and listening.
8. BWMB prices range between 6p and 230p at present. By sorting the fleeces at shearing, you may be able to get at least one sack at a higher price break, which is quite helpful in recovering costs.
9. Coloured fleeces are generally not wanted by the BWMB (although they have shown more interest in Jacob recently), but the rest of the market is interested, particularly if the fleece quality is good. So always ask The Natural Fibre Company or local hand spinners before sending to fleece to the BWMB.
10. Even mulch has a value! Dirty wool contains good nutrition for plants and it composts quite slowly, so arguably is better than bark as a mulch. It also works well at the bottom of runner bean trenches.