

Some Facts about the Sheep Industry in Canada and Alberta



Sheep were among the first animals domesticated. Humans have been living with and using sheep for more than 10,000 years.

There have been sheep in western Canada for approximately 200 years.

There are more than 200 breeds of sheep in the world, selected for traits such as wool type, flocking instinct, and meat quality. Modern breeding programs have developed types of sheep called synthetic breeds.

Some of the most popular breeds of sheep in Canada include: Suffolk, Dorset and Arcott.

The main sheep producing areas in Canada are Ontario and Alberta.

There are approximately 1 million sheep in Canada on about 11,000 farms.

Alberta has over 2000 sheep farms.

What sheep eat:

Sheep are ruminant herbivores, meaning that they eat only plants and digest their food in four stomachs, just like cattle, goats, and deer.

The majority of a sheep's diet is forages – pasture and hay that can include grasses, alfalfa, and clover. Sheep often graze on land that can't be cultivated for human food production because it's too dry, wet, cold or too steep to cultivate.

At certain times in the production cycle shepherds may also feed grains, such as barley, or oats. Grain helps balance a diet for fast-growing lambs, ewes within weeks of giving birth, or ewes with high milk production.

A mature sheep eats approximately 3 kg of hay and grass per day. Weaned lambs eat about 1 kg of grain and 1 kg of hay or grass every day.

On average a mature sheep drinks between 3.8 – 9.5 L of water per day. They need the most amount of water after lambing to help them produce large quantities of milk.

The life cycle of a sheep:

Typically sheep in Alberta live outdoors all year. As long as they have shelter from wind they can live comfortably outside all winter.

It takes approximately 5 months for a lamb to develop inside the ewe (gestation). Most lambs are born between January and June, depending on the farmers' management plan.

Depending on the breed of sheep, ewes may have single or twin lambs, but triplet births are not uncommon. Some ewes give birth to 4 or 5 lambs at one time. Birth weights range from 2 to 5 kg. Depending upon how the shepherd chooses to manage the flock, ewes may lamb (give birth) only once per year or up to 5 times in 3 years.

Sheep are usually sheared in the spring to harvest the wool crop and keep them cool for the summer.

Ewes nurse their lambs from 6 to 10 weeks, until the lambs reach between 27 and 32 kg and are ready to be weaned from milk to eat solid feed and drink water.

Sheep are considered full-grown at 1 year old, weighing between 70 and 125 kg.

Raising Sheep:

In Canada, since 2004, all sheep are required to have an approved identification tag to track their movements in case of a disease outbreak. Farmers use individual identification to monitor how productive their sheep are.

Sheep have good eyesight and an excellent sense of hearing. Their habit of forming flocks helps keep them safe from animals that hunt them. Coyotes are the most common predator of sheep in Alberta. In some farming areas predators include foxes, wolves, cougars, and bears.

Farmers use a variety of means to protect their flocks from predators. These include electric fences and guardian animals such as dogs, donkeys and llamas.

Sheep Products: meat, wool, milk:

The main market for sheep in Canada is for lamb meat. We produce about 40% of the lamb we consume; the rest is imported from Australia and New Zealand.

The first textiles made by early civilizations were probably woven from sheep's wool. Today wool is still the world's leading natural animal fibre.

A majority of the wool produced in Canada is marketed through the Canadian Cooperative Wool Growers (CCWG), coming mostly from Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta. The CCWG grades close to 1400 tonnes of raw wool each year and sells most of it to the USA and UK.

Worldwide, about 1,000,000,000 sheep in about 100 countries produce slightly more than 2 million tonnes of wool.

One mature ewe produces 3 – 4.5 kg of wool a year – enough to make a man's suit.

Wool clothing helps regulate body temperature because it absorbs moisture. Wool can absorb up to 30% of its own weight in moisture and not feel damp or clammy. It is warm in cold weather and helps keep you cool in warm weather.

Wool is resilient, with natural elasticity. Crush, stretch or twist wool and it springs back into shape. Wool garments don't bag or sag and they are durable.

Wool is the only fibre that naturally resists flaming. Unlike many artificial fibres which often melt and stick to the skin when on fire, wool usually smoulders or chars instead of bursting into flame.

Because sheep grow a new coat of wool each year, it is a renewable resource. It is used to clean up crude oil spills; it can be squeezed out and reused up to 8 times.

Sheep have naturally occurring oil on their wool called "lanolin". The lanolin makes the wool water repellent and prevents the cold rain and snow from reaching the sheep's skin.

There is a small dairy industry in Alberta, to produce milk for the specialty sheep cheese market. Lambs are removed from the ewe within 48-60 hours after birth and raised on sheep milk replacer. The ewes are milked in dairy facilities similar to milking parlours for cattle.

A sheep may produce up to 2 litres of milk per day.

Sheep eat woody plants as well as tall weeds and grasses. Flocks of sheep are sometimes used to control undergrowth in forests and reforested areas. They help control forest fires and give newly planted trees a chance to grow.

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