

By Barbara Parry
Photos by Ben Barnhart

Late September in the midst of dyeing skeins for the upcoming New York Sheep & Wool Festival in Rhinebeck, I pause for reflection and a latte. The seasonal shift at the autumnal equinox reminds me that courtship time for rams and ewes is nearing, and there's lots to think about in preparation for my flock's breeding program. I get to play woolly matchmaker, deciding which dams and which rams.



The sheep need no calendar to tell them breeding time is here. Receding daylight minutes and dropping temperatures create a restless energy. From my desk I watch the ewes bolt in unison from one end of the pasture to the other for no apparent reason. I keep a pair of Cormo rams, Teaberry and Parsley, a half mile up the hill, a safe distance from the ewes. Although the girls are nowhere in sight, the boys have also caught the frenetic vibe. Teaberry and Parsley, who have been chums all summer, are suddenly adversarial. Turf wars erupt between them over floor space

in the shed; the next day there's a contentious stand off by the feeder. Even the wethers, the entourage of neutered rams whom we raise strictly for fiber, become agitated. We carry crooks whenever we enter their pasture and never ever take our eyes off the rams.



Choosing ewes best up to task of rearing the next generation of lambs is important for many reasons. Sound choices will make my work at lambing time much easier and will shape fiber harvests for years to come. In deciding who passes muster, I start with a close look at each ewe and a study of my flock record book—my almanac. Does the ewe have a solid confirmation? What is her lambing track record? Was she a good mother to her lambs? Is her udder free from defect?



In addition to a physical pat down, my deliberations also include a careful read of each ewe's wool story as written in my fiber archive. A cedar-lined shelf in a closet holds the history of my flock in

WOOL; hundreds of samples of wool locks are stored individually in little zip-loc bags, each labeled with the name of a sheep, type of sheep, and shearing date. Organized chronologically, the boxes of carefully sorted wool locks show the trajectory of my breeding program

over a decade. Each box represents the wool vintage in any given year.

Spread out on the table before me, these samples help me get my bearings. Wool characteristics are highly heritable which means the mothers are likely to share their fleecy attributes with their sons and daughters. Some wool traits are objective and easy to define. I start by examining **grade**—the fineness and staple formation of a wool lock. While the diameter of each strand of wool fiber can be measured in microns (a micron is 1/1000th of a millimeter) using a special instrument, I use my eye to gauge the relative fineness of each ewe's sample.

Typically the diameter of Cormo wool runs anywhere from 17 to 23 microns, and I can see a bit of a range within my ewe flock.



Next I examine crimp, the zig-zag pattern of fiber growth that gives Cormo wool its signature bounce, looking for evenness and uniformity. My notes from shearing day tell whether the grade represented in a particular sample was uniform throughout the ewe's entire fleece. Uniformity of grade is another important factor. The quality of fleece at the flank and at the hip should resemble the grade at the shoulder, the premium section of a fleece.

I consider staple length, which represents the longitudinal growth of wool from one shearing to the next and has a bearing on both the yield and the ease of processing into yarn. Tugging both ends of a wool lock is a good test of staple strength. While fleece tenderness is more indicative of management rather than breeding, ewes whose fleeces are chronically tender may have weaker constitutions, making them poor candidates for the breeding program.

Checking my notes from shearing day I assess other important factors. The grease weight of a roughly skirted fleece is a good way to compare yield. Absence of kemp—coarse hairy fibers that can grow within a fleece giving it an Albert Einstein-

on-a-bad-hair-day appearance—is significantly noted; so is the absence of colored fibers on a white sheep. Belly wool—fine, crazy-springy fibers resembling silly string—should be confined only to the belly and not extend up the flanks.

Some of my selection factors are more subjective and harder to pinpoint. Over the years my eyes and hands have developed their own instincts. A lock from Calypso's fleece catches my eye. With good staple formation, the lock is snowy white with luster and a robustly defined crimp. Fingering the staple I visualize a resilient yarn, creamy in texture. I glance at my notes from shearing day last year that read "Amazing" beside Calypso's name. And so I pencil her onto the list.

Pairing ewes and rams is part art and part instinct. My flock is small enough where I must take care to keep bloodlines from crossing while keeping in mind the traits that each ram has to offer. I recall a saying I heard many years ago: “The ram is half the flock.” Each lamb carries the genetic heritage of the ram chosen to breed the ewe flock. The ram (or rams) selected for breeding is the single most important factor in shaping the flock. When making my breeding groups, I’m working to enhance the best qualities of both ewes and ram.

Parsley’s offspring carry his legacy of his baby fine fiber, with crimp so fine, you almost need a magnifying glass to count it. Like mini-marshmallows, his lambs bear soft, dense fleeces with high yield. I’ll pair him with ewes of more open fleeces in hopes of increasing wool productivity.

Teaberry’s lambs often have their dad’s big, dark dreamy eyes and movie-star good looks. If I’m lucky they will also inherit the luminous white fleece, dynamic crimp and super long staple length of their sire.



Ultimately my hope is the pairing of excellent ewes with rams who will enhance wool traits will result in awesome bunch of lambs. They will in turn carry forward the most desirable yarn-defining characteristics. That’s the goal. In yarn farming the ram is not only half the flock, but also half the sweater.

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