

## **Notes on the Care of St Croix Hair Sheep**

**Modified from that provided at [stcroixsheep.org](http://stcroixsheep.org) by K. Gerhart**

The St Croix breed of hair sheep is known for its ease of maintenance, but a review of some basic sheep husbandry practices will help a shepherd achieve a healthy flock with good reproductive rates.

### **Facilities**

Fencing. It is critical to protect sheep from coyotes, dogs, and other predators, as sheep, and lambs in particular, are largely defenseless. The perimeter fence should be of woven wire or high-tensile electric fencing. If the perimeter fence consists of woven wire, it should be at least 36" tall with 2 barbed wires stretched above, or 47" tall woven wire with no barbed wire above. A barbed wire stretched along the base of the fence can discourage digging under by predators. High-tensile fences are cost-effective and work very well on flat and moist land; they consist of 5-7 very taut smooth wires that are electrified to prevent sheep and predators from crossing the fence. Both wood and metal posts work well for woven wire fences; high-tensile fences generally have wooden corner posts and fiber-glass spacer posts. Interior cross fences can be lower (36" may be sufficient), can be made of a more traditional electrical type of fence, or if high-tensile, can contain fewer wires. Various suppliers provide excellent explanations of various options for electrical fencing.

Lambing jugs. During lambing, it is useful to have moveable pens or "jugs". These are easy to make by cutting livestock panels (available at most farm supply stores) into appropriate lengths. The jug sides should be at least 36" tall (42" is better); a 4' x 5' jug is sufficient for a ewe with twins. Jugs can be placed in a barn or shed to provide shelter, or can be tied to the pasture fence to provide temporary confinement. Jugs are generally used for the first 2-3 days, to make sure that the lambs are all claimed by their mother, and are all getting sufficient milk.

Catch pens: A shepherd must have a way to easily capture sheep for routine care such as worming and vaccination and for emergency care. Modified jugs can serve this purpose in a small flock; owners of larger flocks may wish to invest in a chute and sorting gate. Sheep can be taught to enter the pens using feed or grain, ensuring that they will be easy to catch when necessary. A shepherd's crook can be used to capture an individual by the neck, and a leg clique (a narrower metal hook) can be used to catch an animal's leg, capturing one sheep from the flock. There are various methods of restraining a sheep once it has been caught. Younger adults who are working with a partner can sit the sheep on its rump and having one person hold it. When handling many sheep, or when restraining sheep by sitting it on its rump is too strenuous, an individual sheep can be held in a "sheep chair" or with a gambel restraint; a shepherd could also invest in a tilt-table. Sheep chairs and gambel restraints are available from sheep supply companies, such as Premier.

Barns and Shelters: Sheep can thrive with very little shelter. Many sheep are grown on pastures with no shade or shelter. Lambs, however, are quite vulnerable to chilling (hypothermia) which is a common cause of death; thus young lambs should be kept dry,

and protected from rain, snow, mud, and wind. A three sided barn can be sufficient to protect lambs; adequate ventilation is very important when housing sheep indoors and must be considered when designing any 4-sided barn or shelter. Be sure to provide clean bedding, and to cover or remove the soiled bedding regularly. While sheep will survive without shelter, providing shelter / shade for growing lambs and adult sheep can reduce stress, improve health, and increase growth rates.

### **Feeds and feeding**

Natural or irrigated pasture is excellent for sheep. Pasture should be supplemented as necessary with hay and grain. Sheep mineral-salt should be available at all times; loose mineral is preferred as sheep will break their teeth on mineral blocks. Products designed for cattle contain excessive copper, which is toxic to sheep; plain salt will not provide adequate minerals and will lead to health problems.

Many new shepherds over- or under-feed their ewes, or have both over- and under-fed ewes present within the flock. Over- or under-weight ewes will not perform well. If a flock demonstrates poor lamb production, survival, or growth, the cause is likely nutrition. The nutrient requirements of the ewe vary dramatically depending on her reproductive status. Dry mature ewes have low nutritional requirements, while ewes raising triplets require large amounts of high-quality feed. If possible, separate ewes according to their reproductive status. For instance, ewes raising twins or triplets should be separated from ewes raising singles, and young ewe lambs shouldn't have to compete for feed with mature ewes.

Hay quality is largely determined by protein content; however, total digestible energy of the hay is also important. Both can be determined by a forage analysis at a forage-testing lab. Good grass hay is sufficient for most stages in a sheep's life. Non-lactating ewes maintain condition easily on dry pasture or about 3 lbs per head of average to poor quality grass hay. An increase in nutrition at the time of breeding, or "flushing", can increase conception rates but requires that the ewes are not fat coming into breeding. Both protein and energy requirements of ewes peak during early lactation, therefore, lactating ewes and pregnant ewes in their third trimester require either good green pasture or 4-5 lbs per head of high-quality hay. Alfalfa hay is expensive and is too rich for dry ewes, making them excessively fat, lowering conception rates, and increasing lambing difficulties. However, alfalfa is an excellent feed for ewes during late pregnancy and lactation, and for growing lambs. Second-cutting grass / clover hay can replace alfalfa. Hay fed during pregnancy should be free of mold and must.

Lamb birth weight and milk-production capacity of the ewe are largely determined by nutrition during pregnancy. Ewes carrying twins or triplets may not be able to meet their nutritional needs during late pregnancy on hay alone, and supplementation with grain is generally recommended. We often feed 0.5 lbs of grain or more per ewe during the last few weeks of pregnancy, especially to young, old, or thin ewes.

A separate "creep" area that lambs can enter but ewes cannot will make it easier to provide grain or good hay to the lambs to boost their growth rates while reducing costs by keeping out the hungry lactating ewes.

## **Health**

St Croix are resistant to various worms, including the barber pole worm which is a common cause of sheep death in the southern US. St Croix lambs develop resistance within a few weeks of exposure to these worms. However, the breed has not demonstrated resistance to lung worms, liver flukes, or nasal bots. Therefore, routine worming may be necessary, depending on your pasture management system and the parasite species present in your area. Ewes are commonly wormed and vaccinated for overeating disease and tetanus (*Clostridium perfringens* Type C & D + Tetanus) approximately 30 days before lambing. Lambs grazing pasture are often wormed and vaccinated at 6-8 weeks, 10 days later, and again at 6 months. Consult your veterinarian for preferred worming products and protocols in your area.

Hooves should be trimmed approximately twice per year; more frequent trimming may be necessary for sheep that don't wear their hooves traveling around a pasture. It is easiest to trim feet when the soil is moist; dry hooves can become very tough.

Summer pneumonia may be prevented by treatment with a Bovine Rhino nasal spray vaccine. Grass awns can sometimes lodge in the teeth and gums, creating abscesses that generally heal on their own. Grass awns that scratch the eye will cause the eye to turn white and go temporarily blind; rinse the eye with saline and treat the sheep with an antibiotic such as penicillin-G or LA200.

## **Reproduction**

St Croix sheep will breed year round. Ewes produce from 1- 4 lambs per pregnancy. Yearlings usually have singles or twins, mature ewes usually have twins, and older ewes may have triplets or quadruplets. Gestation is 144 to 152 days, with an average gestation of 147 days. Rams are active breeders even during hot weather when other breeds show reduced libido.

St Croix lambs are sexually precocious. Ram lambs can become fertile as early as 100 days of age; therefore, ram lambs should be weaned by 90 days. Ewe lambs have given birth as young as 10 months of age; thus ewe lambs should be separated from all rams by 4.5 months (135 days). Many shepherds breed ewe lambs at 7 months to lamb at 12 months; others prefer to wait so that a ewe's first lamb is born at 18 months. Waiting until a ewe is older than 12 months at first breeding may make it harder for the ewe to conceive.

St Croix ewes will breed back as early as 18 days after lambing, and can easily produce two lamb crops per year. Many breeders of St Croix use an accelerated lambing plan, in which the ewe is bred every 8 months to produce about 6 lambs every two years. The lambs are weaned at approximately 2 months of age, and the ram is turned back in with the ewes for 30-45 days. If the ram is left with the ewes year-round, the ewes will tend to cycle later than if he is removed for a period of time, then re-introduced to the ewe flock. In a hot climate, ewes bred in April for September lambs will show reduced lamb production if temperatures near the time of breeding go above 100 degrees. Any stress during the first 25 days after breeding, such as sorting or transporting ewes, can also reduce embryo survival.

It is important for purebred producers to know the parentage of all lambs; thus, most shepherds place ewes & their lambs in a jug for a day or two to make sure each ewe claims her own lambs. Some pregnant ewes will try steal lambs, or “granny”, so it is important to check that the ewe that claims the lambs really has given birth. Also, ewes giving birth at the same time may claim each other’s lambs, so separate ewes that enter labor synchronously. Check that all lambs are getting milk, treat the umbilical cord with 7% iodine, and check the body temperature of any lamb that is bleating, hunched, or lying down excessively (normal temperature is 102° F). Consider providing supplemental bottles of lamb formula for triplets or quadruplets. Lambs should receive some sort of permanent identification before they leave the jug. Ram lambs can be banded (wethered) when a couple days old, and tails can be docked, if desired.

A single ram in a pen will cause problems unless he is given a bred ewe or a wether for company. Rams also do well in a group with other rams; however it is critical that they are introduced to each other in an area where they do not have room to fight. Squeeze them into a pen that has only enough room for them to stand and keep them there for 48 hours. Withhold food and water. When the rams are released, give them immediate access to food and water. In this way, they will get acquainted and sort out their dominance hierarchy without having adequate room to break each other’s necks. Avoid causing your rams to fight or jump fences by keeping a pasture or space between a group of rams and a group of open ewes showing heat.

### **Animal Identification**

Most purebred sheep breeders use either tattooing and / or tags for individual identification. Ear tags allow animals to be identified at a distance; tattoos cannot be lost, but require catching an animal to identify it. Using both provides a high certainty that an individual can be identified correctly. Some breeders also use tags that hang from a dog collar, which is placed around the sheep’s neck. When using collars, please be certain to check your flock for sheep that may have caught their collar on a fence or tree!

Ear tags come in several shapes and can be ordered with customized numbering and information. One-piece snapp tags work well for newborn lambs, as they are light and unlikely to tear out of the ear (as 2-piece swivel tags can do). Sheep paint is useful to place the ewe’s ID on her lambs’ sides, since the lamb ear tags are too small to identify the lambs at a distance. Tattoos of the individual sheep’s registration number can be placed into the ear of each sheep at weaning, along with a larger 2-piece tag. Blank tags and a special ear tag pen are useful to replace lost tags; sheep will tear out their ear tags on fences and feeders, and sometimes even chew them off of each other.

Most states now require that intact male and female sheep have a Scrapie Identification ear tag if they are to be shown, or if they cross state lines. Scrapie tags include an individual ID number as well as a Premise ID (a number given to your farm by the federal government) that allows animals to be traced to their place of origin. The tags are free from the state APHIS office. You can find the nearest APHIS office online, or you can ask your vet or extension agent.

## ***Tag Placement is very critical to success!***

Place tag in ear so that you have 1/4" to 3/8" of space for the lambs ear to grow. But not so far out that the tag can snag easily on things.

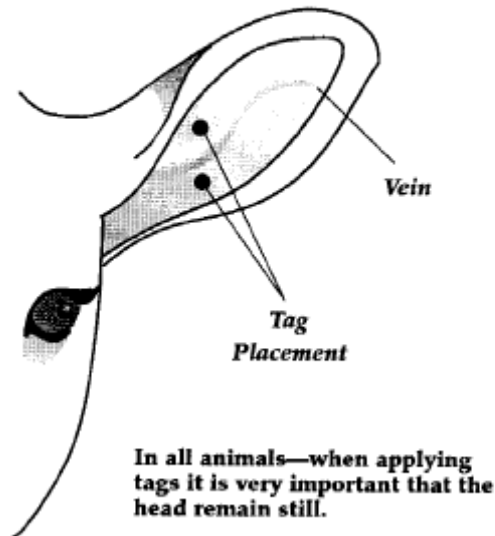


Image from: Premier Sheep Supplies  
2031 300<sup>th</sup> Street, Washington IA 52353  
Tel: 800-282-6631  
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## **Marketing**

Hair sheep generally do not sell well through conventional livestock auctions. Therefore, direct marketing of these sheep is recommended. Ewes can be sold as breeding stock, as can some rams; the remaining rams and wethers are usually eaten either by the shepherd's family or friends. Ethnic markets are another good source of sales. Interest in the St Croix breed can be improved by taking your animals to local fairs, or submitting an article about this rare breed to the local newspaper.

## **Recommended Sheep Resources**

- [www.stcroixsheep.org](http://www.stcroixsheep.org) The official website of the St Croix Hair Sheep International Association. Includes breed history, registration guidelines, St Croix shows and events, articles on St Croix, and links to other sheep-related sites.
- A Handbook for Raising Small Numbers of Sheep. University of California Cooperative Extension. A good general summary of how to raise sheep.
- Simmons, Paula. 1976. Raising Sheep the Modern Way. Garden Way Publishing, Pownal VT. A more detailed view of sheep raising.
- Henderson, David C. 1990. The Veterinary Book for Sheep Farmers. Farming Press, Ipswich, UK. A very complete guide to sheep veterinary care and diseases.
- Maryland Small Ruminant Page. [www.sheepandgoat.com](http://www.sheepandgoat.com) An excellent website covering all aspects of sheep management, with many links to other sites.