



Sheep Shearing

Nearly all sheep need to be sheared.

Introduction:

Nearly all sheep require shearing. Sheep do not have the continuous growing and shedding cycles of many animals. The fleece that keeps the animal warm in winter becomes uncomfortably hot in summer, also tangled and dirty, holding manure, burrs, and other materials the sheep comes into contact with. Spring is the most common season for shearing sheep, though sheep may be sheared at any time as long as there is enough wool to keep the animal warm in winter. Sheep may be sheared before lambing, as the wool quality of the lactating ewes (after lambing) may be reduced. However, timing may be such that the weather is too cold for the shorn animals. Fall shearing may work well, too, if done early enough that the fleece has time to grow for the winter. Timing will, of course, vary according to housing facilities and climate. If sheep are sheared more than once a year, the fibers will be shorter, but the fleece may be cleaner, a bonus if the wool quality is not important. Longer fibers result in higher quality yarn. Note that there are a few “hair sheep” bred for meat or milk that do not require shearing.

Best Management Practices:

Learning to shear

1. Watch the person who does your shearing. Ask questions.
2. Attend a demonstration at a local farm. These may be found by contacting a local sheep breeders or sheep producers association (See “Massachusetts Sources of Information” below). Your veterinarian may also have information about shearing demonstrations in your neighborhood.
3. Attend a shearing school. These are held in various locations, and are often supported by state Agricultural Extension Services in conjunction with sheep associations. Maine has such a program www.umext.maine.edu/events/wool08/school.htm as does New York www.ansci.cornell.edu/sheep/calendar/shearingschool.html. Shearing schools tend to assume some level of experience, so be sure to find out in advance how your skill level fits into a program of interest. Sometimes agricultural fairs have shearing demonstrations.
4. It is not recommended to attempt shearing alone without having some experience or an experienced helper. Your first goal should be to obtain the fleece without damaging the animal (or yourself). A professional shearer can shear a sheep in a few minutes. A novice may take half an hour. A sheep may be able to cooperate for the short time an experienced shearer may take, but not as long a time as a novice may take.
5. If you’ve never seen a sheep sheared, watch a video or look at photos www.ansci.cornell.edu/sheep/management/wool/shearing/shear.htm to give you an idea of what to expect.

Finding a shearer

There are professionals who travel around a region shearing sheep. Check the “Sources of Information” below for suggestions on finding a local shearer. It may be difficult to find a professional shearer if you have only a few sheep. A professional can shear 10-20 sheep an hour, so the time cost of transportation may be excessive relative to the value of the work. If you have only a few sheep it may be possible to form a group with nearby sheep owners and contract shearing for the group. Alternatively you can learn to do your own shearing.

Learn shearing from watching a pro, attending a demonstration or a shearing school.

Resources:

Cornell Sheep Program . www.ansci.cornell.edu/sheep

Massachusetts 4-H at www.mass4h.org has a sheep program. Young shearers may be interested in shearing a few sheep with a novice owner/shearer.

Neary, Mike, Extension Sheep Specialist at Purdue University. 1995. Be Nice to Your Sheep Shearer in: The Working Border Collie, Inc. May/June 1995.

Pioneer Valley Sheep Breeders' Association at www.pvsba.com

Shawn Thayer, Secretary
160 Bryant Rd
Cummington, MA 01026

State Universities in states with substantial commercial sheep production may have shearing information on their websites. Some of this information may be of interest to those with the smaller flocks of sheep that are more common to New England.

The Dorset Sheep Group at the University of Massachusetts Amherst
www.umass.edu/vasci/undergrad/clubs/sheep.htm

The Massachusetts Sheep and Woolcraft Fair at www.masheepwool.org The fair includes shearing demonstrations and is held annually at the Cummington Fairgrounds in Cummington, MA.

Worcester County Sheep Producers Association at www.worcestersheep.com . Their website may not have been updated for some time, but it does have many useful resource listings, including names of wool processors and local-to-Massachusetts shearers, which are still current.

Sheep shearers:

www.Sheepusa.org has listings of shearers. Listings are by state, so check surrounding states if you don't come up with someone local.

For more information visit www.umass.edu/cdl

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