

Non-Dairy Livestock**Weaning Age of Lambs**

By Ulf Kintzel

I am often asked: "When do you wean your lambs?" Usually, instead of answering, I am asking a question back "Why should I wean?" Books and other publications about raising sheep suggest often that one should wean. There is one scenario under which it may make sense: accelerated lambing. All those who have one lambing season per year anyway have in my opinion no need to wean.

WHY WEAN?

The usual suggested weaning age is about 60 to 75 days. The lambs are physically removed from their mothers in order to wean them off the mother's milk. Most people feel that weaning gives a ewe the time that she needs to recover from raising its lamb(s), regain body weight and improve her condition in order to be ready to be bred again during the next breeding season.

However, the process of recovery takes under normal circumstances about 2 to 3 weeks. "Normal" is being defined as not having run down the ewe so much that she is only a skeleton. Normal means that the ewe lost weight that she must regain in order to be bred again.

DISADVANTAGES OF WEANING

Let's do the math: A ewe's gestation time is about 5 months. Raising the lambs for a time suggested in many books is 2 to 2 1/2 months. The needed recovery time is 2 to 3 weeks. That is about 8 months total. What about the remaining 4 months of the year before the ewe gets bred again? During these 4 months the ewe is running the risk of getting too fat, especially if she receives grain. Fat ewes have a lower conception rate.



This female lamb will be kept as a replacement ewe. It is well over 100 pounds and will not be weaned.
Photos by Ulf Kintzel

In addition, a ewe whose lambs are removed after two months is still producing a lot of milk. Removing the lambs creates the risk of mastitis. These ewes need to be observed and possibly removed from the rest of the flock in order to be fed a lower nutrition diet. This would be another logistical task that needs to be considered.

Physiologically speaking, lambs don't need to nurse beyond the age of about 8 weeks. However, a lamb weaned at the age of 8 to 10 weeks has immediately a higher nutritional need coming from the pasture than just a day before. If the lambs are put in a very good pasture during spring flush or in a second cutting meadow, one may not see a slack in growth at all.

However, if weaning takes place during times when the pasture is no longer very palatable during July or August, you may see your lambs not gaining much weight. The same would not hold true if the same lambs would be with their mothers. The ewes will convert the lower quality pasture into higher quality feed in the form of milk.

Another logistical problem may arise. If both ewes and lambs are kept instead of selling the lambs at weaning, you ideally want to provide pasture far enough apart that the ewes and lambs can't hear each other during the next two weeks or you will need to have very safe fences so that you can keep the ewes and lambs apart. Electric fences will often not do that. One can also house the lambs in the barn. However, this scenario comes at a higher cost in money and labor.

Keeping the lambs with the ewes until they wean themselves at the age of 4 to 5 months is far easier to manage and has almost only advantages and almost no disadvantages. You may even see a lamb at the age of 6+ months nurse on occasion. Yet, this appears to be more a social contact between the ewe and its lamb(s), the nursing is extremely short and the milk production is very low at that time.

ACCELERATED LAMBING SYSTEMS

I mentioned before that accelerated lambing is the exception to my suggestion not to wean. Most sheep breeds cycle only during those months when the days get shorter. There are some sheep breeds, like the White Dorper Sheep, that breed out-of-season, meaning they cycle throughout the year. Those sheep can be used for an accelerated lambing schedule. The oldest, the most common, and the most widely practiced version that I know of is having three lambing season per ewe in two years. It is also the most practical version of accelerated lambing that I know of.

Unlike cows, sheep often don't cycle during the peak production of milk. A hormonal process keeps a ewe from ovulating during lactation. This process weakens as milk production drops; ewes that may still nurse a lamb after 4 months or so do start cycling again. So, in order to get to the accelerated lambing schedule one has to wean when the lambs are



These 3 to 4 months old ram lambs will soon be able to breed and thus needed to be weaned from their mothers.

about 2 to 2 1/2 months old, give the ewe a few weeks recovery time and time to dry up and breed her again.

DO I WEAN?

Do I wean? The answer is not a clear cut yes or no. I sell female lambs for breeding purpose at the age of 8 to 10 weeks. While it is not intentional weaning, effectively it is. Those ewes whose lambs I sell early I am trying to re-breed for a winter lambing season. The first market lambs to reach their market weight of 80+ pounds do so at the age of three months. They are harvested at that time and it is again effectively weaning. The ram lambs I keep to sell for breeding purpose need to be removed from the flock at age of 3+ months since White Dorper rams breed at about 4 to 5 months of age. That too can be considered weaning.

On rare occasion I have an older ewe that is raising triplets that is running the risk of getting too skinny and possibly dying. In that case I do wean the lambs. However, all other lambs that are either kept as replacement ewe lambs or market lambs that have to be kept longer to reach their market weight stay with their mothers. No deliberate and planned weaning takes place.

Ulf Kintzel owns and manages White Clover Sheep Farm (www.whitecloversheepfarm.com) in Rushville, NY where he breeds grass-fed White Dorper sheep.

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