



At no other time of the year is the pasture as rich in protein and energy as in early spring.

How Many Lambing Seasons Per Ewe Can You Have Each Year? —Ulf Kintzel

A frequently asked question I receive is about the number of lambing seasons each year. Many times, the people who ask are surprised that I have “only” one lambing season each year. Or they start the conversation by stating they want their sheep to lamb twice a year. Also, a thought often in people’s minds is to let sheep lamb every eight months, or three times in two years.

My one and only lambing season is in the spring, mainly in March. I let my sheep lamb in the barn. There are a number of benefits to once-a-year lambing in the spring. Here is the list:

- I lamb during a time of year that is favorable in weather since hard frost is no longer expected. The nights with zero-degree temperatures or below usually end in February.
- The March-born lambs will start grazing on pasture in April, when the pasture is greening up. They will have high nutrition available during their most rapid growth period of the first few months. At no other time of the year is pasture as high in protein and energy than in the spring and early summer.
- When the summer slump hits, I can start reducing the size of the flock by culling the old ewes, selling the first market lambs, and having some lambs sold as breeding stock.
- During the fall, when gains in market lambs are lower because of the lack of energy in the pasture, I

have only a few market lambs left to fatten.

- The ewes have ample time in late summer and early fall to regain weight and to be in good condition at breeding season in October.
- During the winter, when the feeding cost is highest due to having to feed stored feed, I have only my ewes and rams to feed. It reduces my feeding costs a lot.
- These are the people working at my farm: Me, myself, and a guy named Ulf, who will do all the dirty, undesirable, after-hour, and weekend work that really no one else would want to be doing for any kind of pay. Why is that important to be on the list? Because when you have strenuous weeks and months, starting for me with lambing season in March, continuing with grazing season, sales, and pasture maintenance—basically not letting up until sometime in the fall, you don’t need yet another lambing season coming up later in the year. Instead, I am in need of some downtime, some family time, some idle time. This is especially true as I get older, nearing 60 years of age.

This is what works for me. I see some readers raising their hand, saying: “But the prices for market lambs are awful in the summer and early fall and are best during the winter.” That is indeed true. Selling lambs later in the winter can be more profitable if you have a good way of

Photos by Author

fattening lambs with haylage or corn silage or even grain. Stockpiling pasture where the climate allows grazing well into the winter, or seeding fields for winter grazing with triticale, Italian ryegrass, brassica, and the likes can be an alternative to be able to supply lambs at different times of the year. Still, we are talking one lambing season “only,” just at a different time.

What are the potential downsides of having lambs just once a year? There is only one I can think of, which is that lambs that are ready for the market can only be offered over a period of a few months each year. The majority of the year, a producer with a once-a-year lambing season will not have market-ready lambs available. That is potentially a problem for a producer who sells lambs to a vendor, a distributor, or a supermarket chain. In the past, I remedied that problem in part by having a staggered lambing season: half of the flock lambled in January, half of the flock in April. This allowed me to supply lambs to a couple of vendors for a longer period of time throughout the year. Since my market is now mainly selling breeding stock, and very few market lambs are being sold to a vendor, I no longer practice the staggered lambing seasons. However, please note, I still let each ewe lamb just once a year.

Where do I believe a lambing season every eight months or three times in two years makes sense? It is at large farms with hundreds or even thousands of ewes that need a steady supply of lambs for large vendors or

supermarket chains, where such a steady supply of lambs is absolutely needed year-around to be able to secure such contracts. Such large farms with employees can set up a management system that smaller family farms often cannot without having a high human toll. It is much harder for a single operator to do that over many years.

Of course, you will need a breed of sheep that breeds out of season, meaning the ewes cycle throughout the year. Many sheep breeds only cycle in the fall and are unsuitable for such a system of three lambing seasons in two years.

Years ago, I dabbled briefly on limited scale on shortening the breeding intervals on a select number of ewes. The shorter times in between lambing did bring me more lambs initially, but it also shortened the productive life of these ewes. The time in between lambing, in the long run, was not long enough for the ewes to recover properly. Also, the lambing percentage started dropping over time in subsequent lambing cycles due to the shorter recovery time. Overall, not much if anything was gained. But more work was generated, and more lambs had to be fed at a higher cost due to the seasons they were born in. Keep in mind, my sheep are grassfed. I find it plausible that with heavy grain feeding the ewes will likely regain a good body condition more quickly. But this too comes at a cost.

Personally, I will continue having a single lambing season in March. The profit margin is highest on these



It is March. Lambing season is in full swing.

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Ulf Kintzel
683 Bagley Road, Rushville, NY 14544
(585) 554-3313
www.whitecloversheepfarm.com
Email: ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com

spring-born lambs due the lowest cost possible of raising them, grazing them in the most nutritious pasture of the year. Once-a-year lambing is also the most sustainable option, both for the animals and the operator.

And what about two lambings per ewe each year? The gestation time of a ewe is five months. A lamb needs to nurse on the mother for at least two months before it is physiologically speaking able to survive and thrive without milk. That makes it seven months for one cycle. Multiply that by two, and you have total of 14 months. In addition, ewes don't come into estrus (heat) again for a good month to two months while nursing lambs because of high levels of a prolactin hormone that inhibits the release of all the hormones that cause the ewe to start the reproductive cycle again. As you can see, twice-a-year lambing is impossible for a ewe. There aren't enough months in a year to do that. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.

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