

**Top 5 MI Counties  
Raising Sheep (2000)**

- 1) Washtenaw
- 2) Kalamazoo
- 3) Jackson
- 4) Eaton
- 5) St. Joseph

# SHEEP

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## Background Information

Sheep have played an important role in human history. They were among the first species to be domesticated and provided both meat for food and wool for clothing. Sheep skin hides were also used for clothing and shelter. The weaving and felting of wool were among the first arts to be developed.

The Spanish who founded old Santa Fe, New Mexico, are thought to have brought the multi-colored sheep from which the flocks belonging to the Native American Navajos descended. The first British sheep were brought to Virginia in 1609 by the London Company.

Common breeds of sheep are Rambouillet, Columbia, Corriedale, Targhee and Dorset, all white-faced breeds, and Suffolk and Hampshire, the black-faced breeds.

## Growth and Feeding

Female sheep are called ewes and male sheep are rams. The offspring of a ewe and a ram is a lamb. Ewes are usually bred in the fall and give birth in the late winter and early spring. When a ewe gives birth, it is called lambing. Ewes are pregnant for about five months before they give birth. They usually give birth to one or two lambs, but sometimes they give birth to three or four lambs at a time. Lambs nurse their mothers for two to three months and then they are weaned. Lambs are sold to market at approximately four to six months of age and weigh between 100 and 140 pounds.

Like cattle, sheep are ruminants which means they have four compartments in their stomachs. Sheep do not have any upper teeth but when eating forages such as grass and alfalfa, they close the lower teeth against the dental pad of the upper jaw. Ewe lambs and wethers (neutered males), that are raised for meat are also fed grains such as corn, oats and grain sorghum.

## Sheep Dogs

Dogs often play an important role in sheep production. There are two kinds of sheep dogs: guarding dogs and working dogs. Breeds such as Great Pyrenees guard the sheep flock from other animals that prey on them, like coyotes. The dogs stay with the sheep at all times and scare wild animals away.

Working dogs, like Border Collies and Australian Sheperds, are born with herding instincts and herd sheep from one place to another. These dogs are also very intelligent and eager to work.

## Shearing

The body of a sheep is covered with wool. Michigan produces 460,000 pounds of wool each year. Certain breeds of sheep have higher quality (finer) wool. Once a year the wool is removed by shearing. After shearing, the wool is washed to remove lanolin and dirt. It is then carded to untangle and straighten the fibers and remove any remaining dirt. The wool is now a long, soft untwisted strand of fiber ready to be spun into yarn. The yarn is woven or knitted into fabric. Because wool can be easily dyed any color, it is used to make sweaters, coats, scarves and rugs. An average fleece from one sheep will provide enough fabric for one wool suit.



raw wool

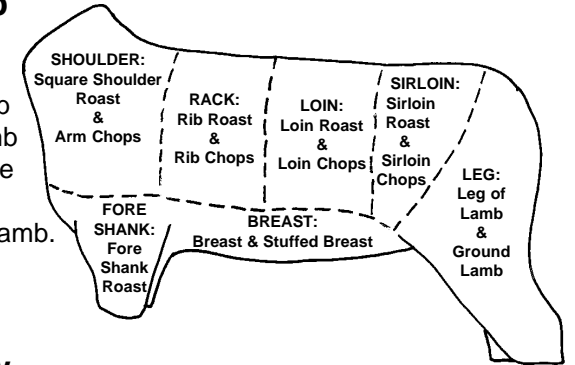
skeins of spun wool

## Products

Most wool is used in clothing, blankets and carpets. Wool produces the lanolin used in cosmetics and lubricants. Wool not suitable for fabric is used as a mulch for plants, to clean up oil spills and grease around machinery; for insulation in homes and buildings, and as an interliner in winter clothing. Other by-products from sheep include piano keys, candles, shampoo, fertilizer, chewing gum and medicines such as rattlesnake antivenom.

## Cuts of Lamb

Meat products from sheep are called lamb. Lamb chops, rack of lamb and leg of lamb are some of the more important cuts of lamb.



## Did you know . . .

- Michigan farmers marketed 34,000 sheep and lambs in 2000, and sold 3.3 million pounds of meat.
- World leaders in wool production are China, Australia and New Zealand.
- A small bit of washed lambs wool is used in the toe of nearly all ballet shoes to cushion the toe when standing on it.
- Resource managers have started using sheep and goats to control leafy spurge (a noxious weed) infestations in central and western United States. They eat it while cattle and other animal species will not.
- Other unique by-products from sheep include: drum heads, tennis balls and insulation (hide and wool); bio-degradable detergents, antifreeze and explosives (fats and fatty acids); instrument strings and surgical sutures (from intestines); syringes, bone jewelry, dice and neatsfoot oil (from bones, horns and hooves).



For information on other programs and materials available, please contact: Michigan Farm Bureau, Attn: Deb Smucker, 7373 W. Saginaw Hwy., Lansing Michigan 48909; PHONE: 800-292-2680, FAX: 517-323-6604.