

Sheep breeds of the United States

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Sheep breeding in the United States has a long and progressive tradition of breed development and genetic improvement. Seed stock producers breed some of the finest, most genetically superior sheep available. There are 47 breeds and types of sheep in the U.S. with several breeds having originated in this country.

U.S. sheep breeds provide a diverse range of performance for growth, carcass merit, reproduction, milk and wool characteristics. This genetic variability can be used to optimize production under varying climatic conditions.

There are six different types of breeds in the U.S. They are: meat breeds, fine wool breeds, long wool breeds, dual purpose breeds, hair and double-coated breeds and minor breeds.

Meat breeds

Cheviot

The Cheviot originated in the hill country that borders Scotland and England and was imported into the U.S. in 1838. The Cheviot is small-sized with a white face and bare head and legs. They are moderately prolific, easy lambers, good milkers, possess excellent lamb vigor and produce a desirable carcass at light weights. They are highly adaptable to a variety of climates, thrive on poor forage conditions and produce

Dorset (both polled and horned)

Originating in Southern England, the Dorset Horn was imported into the U.S. in 1885. In 1948, a dominant gene for polledness occurred resulting in Polled Dorsets which are now popular in the farm flock states. Dorsets are medium-sized, white-faced, produce medium-wool fleeces free of black fibers and have wool extending down the legs. Dorsets are noted for their out of seasonal breeding characteristics and are commonly used in crossbreeding to produce females for out-of-season breeding. Ewes are prolific, heavy milkers, long lived and produce hardy lambs with moderate

Hampshires

Hampshires were developed in the Hampshire country of Southern England. The Old Hampshire, Berkshire Knot and Wiltshire Horn, with the introduction of Southdown and Cotswold, formed the genetic background of the Hampshire breed. The breed is widely used in the U.S. as a source of terminal sires for commercial lamb production. They are a large, moderately prolific breed with wool caps, black faces and medium-wool fleeces. They also have very good milking ability, growth and carcass cutability.

North Country Cheviots

Originating in Northern Scotland, North Country Cheviots were first imported into North America in 1944. The North Country Cheviot is a large, resourceful hill sheep adapted to rough terrain and adverse conditions of northern hill country climates. They are polled, medium- to large-sized with a white face and bare head and legs and produce medium-wool fleece with good staple length. Ewes are good milkers, easy lambers and are fairly prolific. Their medium-grade fleeces are free from hair and kemp and are largely used in the Scottish tweed trade

Montadale

The Montadale was developed in the U.S. from Cheviot x Columbia crosses and is used primarily in the farm flock states. The breed is medium-sized with a white wool covering, bare head and legs, black hooves and nostrils. They are a prolific breed with good maternal instincts, milking ability and produce lambs with lean carcasses. Montadales produce medium wool with good staple length.

Oxford

The Oxford originated in England from Hampshire x Cotswold crosses and was imported into the U.S. in 1846. The Oxford is medium to large-sized with a dark brown face and wool on the legs. It is used primarily as a terminal sire breed in the farm flock states. The breed is fairly prolific, possesses good mothering ability and produces desirable carcasses and medium-grade wool.

Shropshire

The Shropshire originated in England from native sheep and Southdown, Leicester and Cotswold crosses and was imported into the U.S. in 1855. Shropshires are medium to large with a dark face and wool extending down the legs. They are commonly located in farm flocks with emphasis on meat production. They are prolific, possess good milking and mothering abilities and are used as terminal sires in market lamb production. The lambs are hardy, fast-growing and produce lean, well-muscled carcasses. Shropshires produce medium-grade wool.

Suffolk

The Suffolk originated in England from Southdown x Norfolk crosses and was imported into the U.S. in 1888. This is the largest-sized breed in the U.S. which, along with rapid growth rate, makes it well adapted as a sire breed for production of crossbred slaughter lambs. The Suffolk has a bare and black head and legs, is prolific and a good milker, produces a medium-grade fleece and is raised under a range of climatic conditions. Suffolk lambs grow rapidly and produce high cutability carcasses.

Texel

The Texel have been bred in the Netherlands for over 160 years and were first available to U.S. sheep producers in 1990. Texels are hardy, adaptable, medium-sized sheep selected under forage conditions for high muscle-bone and lean-fat ratios. They have a white face with no wool on the head and legs and produce a medium-wool fleece. The breed is considered to have extreme muscling and produce high cutability carcasses.

Tunis

The Tunis originated from Tunisia in North Africa and was imported into the U.S. in 1799. The breed was popular in the South until almost eliminated during the Civil War. The Tunis is medium-sized with a red or tan face and legs, pendulous ears, no wool on the head and legs, polled and a medium-sized fat tail. They are fairly prolific, good milkers and mothers and produce a medium-wool fleece.

Southdown

The Southdown, one of the oldest sheep breeds, originated in England and was imported into the U.S. in 1803. The Southdown is small to medium-sized with a light brown face and wool extending down the legs. The breed is very docile and ideally suited for intensive management. They are early maturing, adaptable to diverse climate conditions, produce muscular, light-weight carcasses and possess excellent longevity. The Southdown is also prolific with good milking ability and lamb survival. They produce a medium-wool fleece.

Fine wool breeds

American Cormo

The American Cormo originated in Tasmania, Australia from 1/4 Lincoln x 1/4 Australian Merino x 1/2 Superfine Saxon Merino and was introduced into the U.S. in 1976. They have open faces and are a hardy breed adaptable to harsh climatic conditions. They produce a white, long stapled, high yielding fine-wool fleece with a high degree of fiber uniformity.

Booroola Merino

The Booroola Merino was developed in Australia from a single commercial Merino Flock selected for reproduction. A single major allele (called FecB) was identified in this flock that has a major influence on prolificacy. In Australia, and New Zealand, the homozygous state (FecBB) results in ovulation rates of five or more, with a heterozygote (FecB+) producing ovulation rates of three or four. The breed has been imported to the U.S. and has been tested widely at U.S. Agricultural Research Stations. The breed is small-sized and slow-growing with a white face and wool extension down the legs. They produce a dense, fine-wool fleece.

Debouillet

The Debouillet was developed in New Mexico in 1920 from Delaine Merino x Rambouillet crosses. Well adapted for southwest range sheep production, the Debouillet is medium-sized, white-faced with wool on the legs, hardy and can lamb

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unassisted under range conditions. They have a well-developed flocking instinct and produce a high-quality, long-stapled, fine-wool fleece.

Delaine-Merino

The Delaine-Merino was developed from the Spanish Merino and has an unbroken line of breeding for more than 1,200 years. Modern Delaine-Merinos are smooth-bodied, intermediate in size with wool extending down the legs. They are also hardy, long lived with a well-developed flock instinct, forage well in less productive regions and are well suited to hill country locations. They breed year-round and produce very high-quality, fine-wool fleeces.

Rambouillet

Developed from the Spanish Merino in France and Germany, the Rambouillet is the foundation of most Western U.S. range flocks. White-faced with wool on the legs, the Rambouillet is the largest of the fine-wool breeds, rugged, adaptable to a wide variety of arid range conditions, has a well-developed flocking instinct and is long lived. The breed also has an extended breeding season and produces a high-quality, fine-wool fleece.

Long Wool Breeds

Border Leicester

The Border Leicester originated in England from Leicester x Cheviot crosses and is found in the northern U.S. and Canada in high rainfall, good pasture areas. The breed has been used throughout the world to sire crossbred females. They are medium to large with a white face and bare head and legs. They are moderately prolific, good milkers and mothers. Border Leicesters yield a long-stapled, lustrous, coarse

Coopworth

The Coopworth breed originated in New Zealand in the 1960's from Border Leicester x Romney crosses and was first imported into the U.S. in the late 1970's. The breed is medium-sized with a very open white face and little or no wool on the legs. They have been intensively selected for easy lambing, prolificacy and good mothering ability. The wool is relatively coarse and has a long staple length.

Cotswold

The Cotswold breed originated in the hills of Gloucestershire, England from indigenous stock and is one of the oldest breeds known. It has contributed to the

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ancestry of other breeds in UK and Europe. It is large with a white face, wool on the legs, and a characteristic tuft or lock of wool on the forehead. Cotswold sheep are noted for their long, stout-fibered, lustrous fleece of natural wavy curls.

Lincoln

The Lincoln originated in England from Leicester x Old Lincoln crosses and was imported into the U.S. in 1825. The Lincoln is a large, deep-bodied sheep with a large frame. They are polled with a bluish-white face, forward-pointing ears and a prominent forelock of wool. The legs are sturdy and fully woolled except for the lower part of the front legs, which is bare. They produce a heavy fleece that is very coarse, highly crimped, long and lustrous.

Perendale

The Perendale originated in New Zealand from crossing the Border Cheviot with the Romney breed. They are an open-faced, medium-framed breed that produces bright, lofty, long-stapled, medium-wool fleeces. Developed as an easy-care sheep, they are both hardy and highly adapted to marginal forage-producing areas.

Romney

The Romney, developed in England's Romney Marsh region to withstand cold and wet conditions, was imported into the U.S. in 1904. They are a medium-sized, white-faced breed with wool extending on the legs. They are good mothers with average or better prolificacy and milking ability and produce a coarse, long-stapled fleece that is well suited for spinning.

Wensleydale

The Wensleydale breed from the United Kingdom has recently been established in the U.S., with its development to date based on imported semen. It is a very large, prolific long-wool sheep, which has been used in Britain as a ewe sire breed, mated to hill breed ewes to produce prolific crossbred females.

Dual Purpose Breeds

American Miniature Brecknock (miniature cheviot)

In 1833, these sheep were called the Southern Hill Cheviot or the small Cheviot. The first sheep were brought in by the Hudson Bay Co. in Washington state in 1833. Their fleece is Medium to long (3" to 7") in white, black, tan or dilute in solid colors, dense and even, covering body completely from behind the poll and ears where it often forms a ruff, to above the knees and hocks, including the belly. The balance of the body is covered with a fine, shiny short hair. There is no wool on the face or legs.

Columbia

Columbia was the first breed developed in the U.S. beginning in 1912 from Lincoln x Rambouillet crosses. They are a hardy and gregarious breed and make good mothers. They are one of the larger-sized breeds in the U.S., have white faces with wool extending down the legs and are increasingly used as terminal sires to produce fast-growing, lean market lambs. They yield heavy, medium-wool fleeces with good staple length.

Corriedale

The Corriedale breed originated in New Zealand from Lincoln and Leicester x Merino crosses and was imported into the U.S. in 1914. Corriedales are a medium-sized, white-faced breed that is well adapted to the farm flock states. They are prolific, good mothers, produce good market lambs and yield heavy, medium-wool fleeces with good staple length and luster.

East Friesian

The East Friesian originated in Northern Germany and the Province of Friesland in the Netherlands. Imported as purebreds into the U.S. from Canada in 1994, this breed has the highest milk production of the improved dairy sheep breeds. They are a docile, large size, open white faced, polled breed with a coarse grade staple length wool. A high percentage of ewes will lamb at 12 months of age and mature ewes are highly prolific.

Finnsheep

Finnsheep originated in Finland where they are known as Finnish Landrace. They were imported to Canada in 1966 and to the U.S. in 1968, where they are primarily used to produce crossbred ewes. They are a small- to medium-sized, fine-boned, open-faced breed with medium-grade, good-staple length wool. Their wool is mainly white, but colored is acceptable. Ewes are hardy, will lamb on an accelerated program, have strong maternal instincts and are highly prolific. Lambs have high livability and produce lean carcasses. The breed is adaptable to a range of management conditions.

Panama

Originating in Idaho in the early 1900's, the Panama began as a cross between Rambouillet rams and Lincoln ewes. Following approximately five years of crossbreeding, rams and ewes were mated among themselves to establish the breed. The Panama is a hardy breed that is highly adapted to range areas with ample feed conditions. They are polled, resemble the Columbia breed but are more

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intermediate in size, and produce a heavy, dense medium-grade fleece with a long staple length.

Polypay

The Polypay is a breed developed in the 1970's at the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station at Dubois, Idaho, and Nicholas Farms at Sonoma, California. Targhee x Dorset and Rambouillet x Finnsheep crosses were mated to form a 4-breed composite. The breed is medium-sized, white-faced and prolific with an extended breeding season. They are good mothers and milkers, and produce lambs with acceptable growth and carcass quality. Due to the recent formation of this breed, body size, type and fleece traits are still quite variable.

Targhee

Developed in 1926 at the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho, the Targhee has 3/4 fine-wool and 1/4 long-wool breeding from Rambouillet x Columbia and Rambouillet x Lincoln x Corriedale crosses. The Targhee is a medium- to large-sized, white-faced breed with wool on the legs and is adaptable to varied climate and forage conditions; they are predominantly located in the intermountain and northern states. They herd well, produce good quality market lambs, and yield a heavy, medium-wool fleece with good staple length.

Hair and Double coated Breeds

Barbados Blackbelly and American Blackbelly

Barbados Blackbelly sheep, of predominantly West African origin, were imported from Barbados into the U.S. in the early 1900s. The breed was almost lost in the U.S. as a result of cross-breeding, but has made a come-back due to the efforts of a small group of dedicated breeders. The breed's hair coat is a distinctive red-brown color with black belly and badger face pattern, and requires no shearing. These sheep are medium in size, hardy, prolific, and breed year-round. Their meat is extremely lean and mild. They are favored by the grass-fed, all-natural market because they can be raised without chemical intervention in most locales and do well on lower-quality forage.

American Blackbelly are a hair sheep that originated in Texas from crossing Barbados Blackbelly with Mouflon and Rambouillet. The breed is small-sized and slow to reach mature weight. However, they breed year-round, are fertile at 4 months, and generally twin. Referred to as "barbado," "blackbelly barbados," "barbies," and "barbs," they succeed as a range sheep because they generally require little if any human intervention. They are disease resistant, parasite

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tolerant, and able to lamb unassisted. Their meat is extremely lean and mild, and their massive rack of horns is prized by trophy hunters.

California Reds

California Reds originated in 1970 at the University of California at Davis and are a cross between Tunis and Barbados breeds. They are almost deer-like in appearance but respond very well to quiet handling. They have a gentle disposition and are good mothers and milkers. The lambs are born all red but change in color as adults. Mature California Reds turn a light tan color but retain the red color on their legs and head. Rams possess a full mane of hair growing down the chest and are hornless.

Dorper

The Dorper breed was developed in the early 1940's in South Africa from crossing Blackhead Persian and Dorset Horn breeds. Their color is solid white or white with black heads. Dorpers are highly fertile and have an extended breeding season. Ewes are docile with good mothering ability. They are hardy and adaptable to hot, dry, humid and cold climatic conditions. Dorpers have a mixture of hair and wool, but do not require shearing. They are non-selective grazers and perform well under both extensive and intensive production systems. Dorper lambs have rapid growth, early maturity and yield muscular, high-quality carcasses.

Katahdin

The Katahdin breed originated in Maine from crosses of the St. Croix, Suffolk and Wiltshire Horn. They are a woolless, easy-care sheep capable of high performance in a variety of management systems. Katahdins possess excellent mothering abilities, are good milkers, prolific and have an extended breeding season. Their hair coat can be any color or color pattern and they possess unusual tolerance to heat and humidity as well as cold environments. Katahdins are the largest of the hair breeds and naturally produce a lean and well-muscled carcass with excellent meat flavor.

Romanovs

Romanovs originated in what was previously the Soviet Union in the 18th Century and have been in the United States since about 1986. Considered to be one of the most prolific breeds in the world, they are a hardy and adaptable breed known for their early sexual maturity, out-of-season breeding, multiple births, ease of lambing and mothering abilities. Romanovs are born black and lighten to a soft gray as they grow their secondary fleece coat. The wool color is almost always lost on the first cross with white wool type breeds.

Royal White Face (Polled and pure white)

Low stress, docile, intelligent, alertness, high lamb survivability, easy manageability with low labor input, parasite resistant. The largest framed pure hair sheep in the USA developed for adaptability in both warm and cold climates. Superior year-around meat production and fine grain skins for production of washable apparel. This new breed of sheep is the first developed in the USA since the Polypay.

St. Croix

The St. Croix was developed in the Virgin Islands and is also known as the Virgin Island White. The St. Croix has been used as a base breed for the Katahdin, among other breeds, due to its parasite resistance and other health benefits. The St. Croix is wool free and does not require shearing. The registry requires animals to be white, however a dark spot on the ear or nose or dark-lined eyes are allowed. Rams are polled and have a mane. They are fairly prolific, have an extended breeding season and lamb unassisted. The St. Croix is known for mild and tender meat production; it is also being rotated into dairies for milk and cheese production.

Minor Breeds

Babydoll Southdown

One of the oldest of the English breeds is Southdown, originating on the South Down Hills of Sussex County, England. These small sheep were known for their extreme hardiness and produced meat with tenderness and flavor.

Black Welsh Mountain

Related to the Welsh Mountain, the Black Welsh Mountain is the product of approximately 100 years of selective breeding. Introduced into the U.S. in 1972, they are a small breed standing only 20" to 24" tall. They are a hardy, self-reliant breed with a long, wool-covered tail and blue skin. Their black wool is short, dense and without kempy fibers.

Bluefaced Leicester

The Bluefaced Leicester origins began in Robert Bakewell's improvements to England's longwool sheep in the 1700's sharing its background with the Border Leicester. The breed was developed to meet the demand of Northern England breeders. It is commonly used as a sire bred on blackfaced hill ewes to produce a highly productive crossbred ewe, traditionally called the "Mule." The Bluefaced Leicester is a large framed long-bodied sheep. They carry no wool on their heads, bellies, legs, udders, scrotal or vulval areas. The ewes are prolific, carry their

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udders high and clean and have excellent milking ability. The blue coloring on their heads is covered with a fine white hair. The fleece is classified as a long wool but it can be used to produce high quality luster yarns with drape. The wool is tightly curled, semi-lustrous and opening cleanly to the skin. Though predominantly a white wool breed, it does carry a recessive black gene and natural colored lambs do appear.

California Variegated Mutant

The California Variegated Mutant (CVM) originated from the all-white Romeldale breed, which was developed by selective breeding between the Romney and the Rambouillet breeds. The CVM is a product of recessive color pattern genes. Overall patterns can vary, but the typical standard pattern is the badger face with body wool colored cream, dark gray or silver and the belly, britch and neck a darker color. Ewes lamb easily, are good mothers and frequently produce twins. CVMs grow a soft, high-yielding, long-stapled uniform fleece.

Clun Forest

The Clun Forest originated in England and is considered a hardy, moderately prolific, easy-care breed of medium size. They are brown/black-faced with no wool on the face and legs and produce a medium-wool fleece. They are good mothers and milkers and are prolific. They are also good foragers and are known for their longevity.

Gulf Coast

The Gulf Coast is one of the oldest types of sheep in the United States and has existed in the southern regions for several centuries. Their origin is unknown, but descendants are of mixed breeding and developed largely through natural selection under semi-tropical range conditions. They are open-faced with white to brown color, small in size with refined skeletal structure, without wool on the legs and underline and produce lightweight medium-grade fleeces. They are very hardy and highly adapted to extensive management conditions in the humid sub-tropical climates that exist in the southeastern United States. They also have a unique innate tolerance to gastrointestinal parasites and will breed during the summer months.

Icelandic

This breed originated in Iceland and is hardy and adapted to harsh, changeable climate and marginal pasture and browse conditions. Ewes are prolific, good milkers and possess exceptional longevity. The Icelandic has historically been a meat breed, but is also a noted source of wool for lopi yarn. Fleece colors can be white, tan,

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brown, gray or black. The breed is both polled and horned with both sexes capable of horn growth.

Jacob

The Jacob, although of unknown origin, has been raised for over 350 years in England. The Jacob is small and multihorned with black spots randomly distributed on the body and distinctive black facial markings over each eye and on the nose. They produce a medium-grade wool with some kempy fibers that create a hair effect characteristic of tweed clothing.

Karakul

Native to the deserts of Central Asia, the Karakul is one of the world's oldest breeds. They are fine-boned and open-faced with long pendulous ears and a fat tail used as an energy reserve. They are hardy, adaptable, easy lambers with strong maternal instincts, have an extended breeding season with low prolificacy and are noted for their longevity. Fleece colors include black, silver, blue, gray, tan, reddish brown and white. Lambs are born with a lustrous "Persian lamb fur" fleece coat. Karakuls produce a long-stapled, light-weight, often double-coated fleece with excellent felting qualities.

Navajo-Churro

The Navajo-Churro sheep was developed in the U.S. by the Navajo Indians in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Originating from the Spanish Churro, the first type of domestic sheep in North America, the Navajo-Churro is known for its adaptability and hardiness to harsh desert conditions. Some rams have four fully developed horns and some ewes have small horns. The ewes cycle naturally out of season, lamb easily, usually have multiple births and are protective mothers. The Navajo-Churro has a long hair outer coat and a fine-wool inner fleece, which may be white, black, gray or brown. Their wool is excellent for use in hand-spinning, specialty garments and carpets.

Scottish Blackface

The Scottish Blackface originated in Scotland and is used in the production of crossbred ewes that perform well when mated to meat breed rams on lowland farms. The breed is medium-sized and black-faced with little wool on the head and legs. The ewes are easy lambers, good milkers and are very protective of their lambs. Their wool is very coarse in quality and has a long staple length.

Sennybridge Welsh Mountain

FLEECE Nice spring and slight luster. Very little or no kemp. Low in grease. Colors solid white, solid black, solid tan/brown and dilute.

Shetland

Originated over a thousand years ago, the Shetland breed is of Northern European Short-Tail descent. Shetlands are a primitive breed noted for their natural hardiness, lambing ease, longevity and ability to survive under harsh conditions. They are one of the smallest breeds with naturally short tails. Shetlands are primarily known for their production of colorful wool upon which the Shetland woolen industry is based.

Wiltshire Horn

The Wiltshire Horn originated in southern England where it has been raised for several centuries. Sometimes mistakenly classified as a hair sheep, it is a wool breed that sheds its wool. Both sexes are horned. The breed has good meat conformation and good growth rate.