

How to Purchase Sheep

So You Want to Be a Shepherd... or Questions to Ask When Purchasing Sheep

by The Finnsheep Breeders Association

Photo courtesy Firefly Fields Finnsheep

Recently, it has come to our attention that there is some confusion regarding how a new shepherd can most safely purchase healthy, registered sheep. In an effort to help, we have compiled some ideas and questions pertaining to purchasing sheep.

The first piece of advice is BUYER BEWARE! Do your homework before attempting to purchase sheep. Learn everything you can about the breed of sheep you are interested in buying. Talk to several breeders.

Research

Familiarize yourself with the breed standard of the breed/breeds you are interested in purchasing. These can be obtained from the breed organization. Learn what the breed should look like and what qualities it should have.

Decide on goals for your flock

Before going out to look at sheep, or even calling breeders, you need to decide what your goals are for your flock. Breeders have different goals and it is important to ask each breeder what he is selecting for. Finnsheep are a highly versatile breed and you want to find a breeder who is selecting

for the things you want to buy. If wool is important to you, maybe it is best to work with a breeder who is selecting for wool. If white production ewes are what you want, find a breeder who selects for this.

Interview the breeder

How long has the breeder been raising sheep?

Is he a member of his breed organization (for example, the Finnsheep Breeders Association)? Buy from members who are active members of their breed association. This is an indication that they have a strong interest in the breed and the qualities listed in the breed standard. It is best to support those who pay to advertise in the Breeders Directory Listing, in the newsletter and on the breed organization's web site.

Does he maintain records on the flock (which you may request to see)?

Are his sheep registered?

What are the main goals the breeder has for his/her flock: prolificacy, wool quality, commercial (lamb for consumption), raising crossbred replacement ewes, etc.?

What are the selection criteria he uses in deciding which sheep he is going to sell and which he is going to cull? Or does he put all his lambs up for sale as breeding stock (i.e. meaning they are worthy of being registered). If the breeder does not select, beware...

Would the breeder be willing to mentor you as a new shepherd?

What is the purchase price of the sheep? Does this include the registrations for the sheep you are purchasing or is this a “pet quality” price? Beware of individuals who are selling sheep cheaply. (Remember the old adage, “You get what you pay for.”)

Does the breeder have references? Don’t hesitate to ask him for names of past customers that you can contact for a reference.

Ask the breeder if he will stand behind his sheep if there is a problem. For example, what if the ewe or ram you purchased is not fertile? Will the breeder replace it or what arrangements will he make?

Assess the breeder’s personality as you converse with him. Does he seem reliable and easy to work with? Don’t be afraid to call several breeders until you find someone you can work with who has the type of sheep you need.

Try to purchase your starter flock from one or two farms. Each additional farm you go to increases the odds that you may bring home some type of disease or unwanted problem.

Visit and observe

Look at the lambs or sheep you are buying and the environment they are living in. Are the living quarters for the animals clean (by farm standards)? Do they have good hay (not moldy) or adequate pasture? Is there clean drinking water available? During the rainy months, is there accessible high ground so the sheep are not standing in water? Are the hooves of the adult sheep in good condition? (Not misshapen or overgrown “elf shoes”.)

Look at the lambs / sheep you are buying. Do their eyes look bright and alert? Beware of anything that looks unusual such as nasal discharge or raspy breathing. If in doubt, have a vet or experienced shepherd look at the sheep with you.

Make sure the lamb/sheep is “up on his pasterns” and has a good bite.

Do the sheep / lambs look “strong” to you? Even lambs should have good strong, straight legs etc.

Do not buy a sickly lamb / sheep just because it is cute, you drove a long way, the price is right, or you feel sorry for it. You could be buying many months of expense and heartache. You could also possibly contaminate your farm and home and infect any other animals living there.

Check that rams / ram-lambs have two fully descended testicles.

Health

This is a major concern when purchasing any type of livestock.

Ask the breeder about the health status of his flock. Ask him what diseases he tests for, how often he tests, and what percentage of his flock is tested. Ask him to give you the name of his vet if you feel a need to further verify this information.

Is he enrolled in the Scrapie Flock Certification Program? Has he ever had Scrapie in his flock? Does he raise other breeds with his Finnsheep? (Black-faced breeds have a greater susceptibility to Scrapie).

Other diseases to ask questions about are: OPP (Ovine Progressive Pneumonia), Johnes Disease, Foot rot, Caseous Lymphadenitis, Brucellosis.

Is his flock closed? If not, what does he do when he brings in replacements?

Does he vaccinate and deworm? You want to purchase animals that are well cared for. Generally, most flocks are vaccinated for Clostridium Perfringens and Tetanus (C D & T) and are dewormed on a regular basis. Some breeders have good reasons for not vaccinating or deworming (such as organic farming). If the breeder is not vaccinating and deworming, find out why.

Biosecurity: What does he do to insure his farm is safe? (In other words, how does he prevent diseases from coming into his flock / farm).

Registration

This is an important issue. If you are paying for registered breeding stock, then you have the right to obtain registration papers. If the sheep you are purchasing do not have papers, then their lambs are not registerable, even if they are purebred.

Ask the breeder if his flock is registered – if all his purebred ewes and rams are registered. Ask to see their official registration papers.

Ask if the lambs born in the current year are already registered. Many breeders register their lambs and transfer them at the same time. This is not unusual. But if the parents of the lambs you are interested in are not

registered, this tells you something about this individual. He will have to “back register” the parents in order to register the lambs. This will cost the breeder double the usual registration fee and can take a lot of time. It is best to buy registered animals or at least buy sheep whose parents are already registered.

Discuss with the seller how long he thinks it will take him to get his registrations/transfers completed. Here you are taking a leap of faith, but if you have done your homework, you should have a pretty good idea if the seller is reliable.

Wool

If you are interested in wool, it will be helpful to ask the following questions:

Is wool important to the breeder? Does he select his replacements with wool in mind? Some Finn breeders are interested in wool quality and others do not consider it a top priority.

What does he do with his fleeces? Sell to the wool co-op? Sell to handspinners? Personally use the wool for spinning, knitting, weaving or felting?

Ask the breeder if he micron tests his fleeces. These tests give the shepherd a quantitative analysis of each fleece. Ask to see the records.

Also ask the shepherd if he jackets his fleeces. If not, what does he do to keep them clean?

Ask them how often he shears. Most Finnsheep are sheared once a year in the US and twice a year in Finland.

Be sure that the wool is not too hairy. The wool in Finns varies quite a bit. Finn wool should be 24 to 31 microns. If the breeder has tested the parents' fleeces, he should have paperwork that shows the micron count and the coefficient of variation (the uniformity of the fleece). Wool is 40% heritable. If you want to produce lambs with good wool, then the parents must have good wool.

The wool in colored sheep is often toward the coarser end of the spectrum. This is normal. However, it should still have crimp and look like wool, rather than hair or fur. (The lamb that is "fuzzy" as a baby is adorable, but will have coarser wool later on.)

Last but not least...

If you do have a problem with a breeder, contact a board member of the breed organization and ask for assistance. It is not the role or responsibility of the board of directors to police the relationship between a buyer and a seller. It is not even their legal right to do so. However, if there is a problem and the seller is an active member of the association, a board member may be able to help resolve the problem.