

**Workshop Title: Organic sheep From Lambing to Shearing**

**Speaker(s) & their titles:** Lorna McMaster and Harry Stoddart

**Executive Summary:**

Lorna McMaster presents her observations in the last four years of grazing sheep organically on PEI. By closely watching the behaviour of her sheep, they were able to transition from a rotational grazing model to free-choice grazing. She describes her herd, grazing techniques and thoughts on maintaining an organic flock. Harry Stoddart also shares his experiences with sheep and grazing.

**Detailed Notes:**

**About Lorna's farm:**

They have a Bordelester and Shetland herd, as well as a Border Collie breeding and training centre and a wool business. They sell hats at farmers' markets and crafts shows and a line of needle felting kits, handspun yarns, and other items to rug hookers and crafts people. They also have an on-farm sheep shop.

They started raising organic lamb in PEI by importing a flock from New Hampshire and she would highly recommend avoiding that at all costs. They do interspecies grazing with ducks, horses and sheep. Their rotational grazing plan moves the sheep every 2-3 days, the pasture is mowed, and sheep don't return for 6-8 weeks.

In the winter, the sheep have indoor and outdoor access to a small shed - winter maintenance is very important for wool breeders. They have a three choice housing system - Shetland and crosses love to be outside but they also have two indoor options.

They have a closed flock and a family group breeding strategy. There are five family groups and they take time for looking closely at genetics.

They only feed grain during the last month of pregnancy and lactation. The sheep eat lots of kelp during winter and spring. They boost immune systems (diatomaceous earth, garlic, apple cider vinegar and access to evergreens allows more chance to combat illness)

They are into year 4 and have hit the "4th year blues." Even though they were being really careful, they are seeing parasite issues in a big way. Most people see parasites catch up (in the fourth year) and need to take animals off organic status during the time it takes to cure.

**Benefits of rotational grazing:**

- Maximize pastures
- Reduces exposure to parasites

But from a sheep's perspective:

- Under stress all the time in a small area that may or may not be comfortable in flight zone
- No control over sun, shade, mosquitoes, black flies
- Lack of control over plant selection and rest and rumination location
- Constant moving means territory is never established
- Two conflicting ideas (Borderlesters want to stay in one place and Shetland wants to see perimeter - they are an island breed)

They changed to open pasture grazing where sheep have consistent access to trees. They figured the sheep are all sick anyways so we put them all together and spent lots of time following them around and looking at behaviour and health changes. The sheep scattered - the sick sheep went to yarrow, daisies, dandelions, and the healthy ones wanted high protein that we (humans) would assess as quality feed and in about a week they all began to gain. Now every couple of hours, they head out in a straight line, graze and come back to the barn - free choice grazing. They don't go back to the same place on their own. We left them there for about two and a half months and have seen better lamb growth than ever. It's a different way for us of looking at how we will maintain an organic system. You can have way more sheep in rotational than free grazing. Lorna periodically pulls them out to figure out what is the stocking density or carrying capacity of her field.

They generally cull for wool and behaviour towards sheep dogs but this year they are also culling for the ideal number for our pasture. We can do it because the value is in the wool. Our lamb is worth just about the same as our fleeces.

#### **Breed selection and hybrid vigour:**

They are up to an f4 - crossing the crosses and no longer have pure Borderlester

#### **Ireland observations:**

It is very rare to see pure-bred in traditional societies and in fact, they aren't raising sheep in the way that we are encouraged to do it here. The sheep are born and live their whole lives on one pasture and generally "manage it" themselves.

#### **Biosecurity:**

Biosecurity is crucial. It's tricky because the public is on the farm frequently (for sheep dog demos and sales), so you have to be careful. In the same way, it's so

important in terms of introducing new animals (need records in terms of parasite management). They have quarantine areas for newcomers.

**Maintaining an organic flock:**

- Keeping it small is really important. Low stocking density so that you can pay attention to individuals (they have 24 ewes grazing on ten acres, used to go as high as 60)
- Culling heavily (they don't treat, they cull)
- Still consider intensive rotational grazing with mowing but are moving into system of free grazing when fields are ready and healthy (based on observation not necessarily science)
- Reducing stress by allowing sheep to have choices
- Breeding carefully
- Consider crossing for hybrid vigour
- Quarantine for six week cycle
- Maximize profits by paying attention to wool quality

**Caring for wool:**

- Wool is only as valuable as the time you put into it by paying attention to it - genetics and cleanliness. Now breeding for curls rather than crimps (look for crimp or curl, length, luster, lack of breaks and cleanliness).
- Only feed outside (eating through fence not rolling in fleece)
- Shear twice a year
- Wind is critical factor especially on PEI. We check the wind before we feed and then feed on the other side to keep wool clean
- Move the ewes for winter feeding to avoid having food and poop in same place
- Shear on wool rug (need something to catch the wool and keep it clean and keep hay out)
- Screen the wool and shake it out - 50% of vegetation will fall out
- Careful picking at initial shearing and throw away dirty sections
- Second cuts shouldn't be falling out of the fleece
- Be selective!
- Some spinners will even request a sheep by name so we keep careful records
- Never shear unless there has been a good drenching rain and then dried - nothing dulls shears quicker than dirt and sand

**Harry Stoddart's Experience with Rare Breed Sheep:**

**Romney Sheep**

- The herd was owned by a hand spinner and selected for fleece quality for over 25 years

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- Great mothering instinct (lamb in group pens, protective, no lamb rejection) but weak flockers

Rotational grazing from May to November but never on the same piece of pasture twice in the same year. Never wintered on the same piece of pasture in consecutive years. Wet baleage rolled out for winter. There is less wastage than anything else we have tried, plus it doesn't blow around as much so stays out of fleece.

**Profit centre:**

- Meat (100% grassfed)
- Wool sold at all times of production to hand spinners, felters and fibre artists. Wool goes to a spinning mill where we have the yarn made. The skins are tanned and sold.

**Lessons learned so far:**

Lambing in February beats May (as opposed to what he says in book) and leads to higher fertility (Romney's are seasonal breeders). Our twining % went from 10% to almost 50% and we have better lamb growth with less parasites.

Wet hay beats dry because sheep will eat the whole plant and it doesn't stick in fleece as much.

Shear in late May by setting up proper handling facilities (slight modification to our cattle handling works well)

We have a wool share that is mailed to people all over the country.

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Lorna's meat is sold by the piece to a CSA and is sold around 30lbs

Harry's dress weight is around 30-55lbs depending on when they go (slow growing lamb tastes better)