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DON CHILDERS

Raise blackbelly sheep

By Carol Elkins

It's the homesteader's dream: a sheep that you don't have to shear, that regularly twins without needing your help, and whose meat is mouthwateringly mild and tender. If you've been thinking about adding a few sheep to your homestead, blackbelly sheep should be at the top of your list.

Blackbelly sheep come in two breeds — the original Barbados blackbelly from the Caribbean, and the American blackbelly, a magnificently-horned breed developed in Texas by crossing Barbados blackbelly with Mouflon and Rambouillet sheep.

Arguably the most exotic-looking of the hair sheep breeds, both blackbelly breeds have long black badger stripes running down either side of the face and a jet black belly that provides stark contrast to their tan sides and back. Seen from a distance, one could easily mistake a flock of these sheep for a herd of African gazelles.

Which breed to buy?

The American blackbelly's popularity developed because hunters were eager to bag a ram for its trophy-quality horns. The most commonly seen are homonymous horns that sweep outward and away from the face in curls. Less common are rams with more Mouflon genetics with heart-shaped horns that curl backward toward the neck.

Barbados blackbelly rams, on the other hand, are hornless (polled). They are generally larger and more muscled than American blackbelly. If you are concerned about damage to buildings and equipment, you might be better off with the polled Barbados blackbelly. Most people, however, choose Barbados blackbelly because



Blackbelly sheep rarely need help with lambing and triplet lambs are not uncommon. Blackbelly lambs are between 5 and 7 pounds at birth.

they want to help save it from extinction in the U.S. In 2004, there were only 12 breeding rams and 200 ewes in the U.S., and more than half of them lived in university research flocks with no way to distribute their genetics. Thanks to the efforts of a handful of dedicated breeders working together to maximize their flocks' genetic diversity, there are now more than 1,700!

Where to get them

Even with 1,700 registered sheep, there are still not enough Barbados blackbelly breeders to meet buyer demand. You may have to drive a few hours or even hire a transport company to pick up sheep. On the other hand, American blackbelly are much more plentiful and are easier to locate.

Because there is still a great deal of misinformation about the two breeds of sheep, make sure you buy sheep from someone who can provide breeding records and preferably registers his breeding stock. A lot of people still wrongly refer to the horned breed as "Barbados blackbelly" or

"Barbados" and may sell you sheep that aren't the breed you expected to buy. Think twice about buying them at a livestock auction. You are buying without any clue as to the genetics of the flock or its health. You could end up with foot rot, bad udders, poor lambing, and a host of other problems. Ewes of both breeds are polled (although sometimes an American blackbelly ewe will have small horns).

Without seeing a ram from the same flock as the ewes, you have no way of knowing which breed they are. So when buying ewes, ask to see photos of the entire flock, including the rams, to make sure you get the breed you want and evidence that your ewes will produce American blackbelly rams with optimum horn length or Barbados blackbelly rams with no horns at all.

Before bringing them home

Before you buy sheep, you'll want to carefully consider how you'll house them, contain them, feed them, and protect them from predators.

Blackbelly sheep are extremely hardy sheep and can thrive in most climates, all the way from Canada's cold British Columbia to the hot and humid southern U.S. In cold climates, they will grow a warm woolly undercoat in the winter that will shed out in great dreadlocks in the spring.

They do require protection from the weather — wind, rain, snow, hail, and intense sun — and can be inexpensively housed in a simple, small, three-sided pole barn. If you live where winter freezes, you'll want to consider how to handle water needs. If you have the luxury of adding power to your sheep shelter, you can heat a water trough or provide an occasional heat lamp.

What you feed blackbelly sheep largely depends on where you live and what foodstuffs are available and affordable. Sheep need roughage — either pasture grass, baled grass hay, or alfalfa. The hay doesn't have to be top quality, but higher protein levels will improve the overall health of your flock. I recommend giving grain only to ewes who are gestating or lactating. If nighttime temperatures

fall below zero, I'll give my rams each a cup of grain or whole corn just for the warmth of the additional calories. Sheep need a mineral block, too, but be careful to get mineral that does *not* contain copper. Copper is toxic to sheep. Look for "sheep blocks" or loose "sheep mineral."

Fencing considerations depend more on what you are trying to fence *out* than trying to fence the sheep in. Blackbelly sheep are great jumpers, but a 48-inch field fence is adequate as long as they have no reason to want to be on the other side of the fence. Other reasons might include a member of the opposite sex (don't let rams and ewes share a common fence), pressure from predators or people, and the proverbial greener grass on the other side.

Check with your neighbors and local Cooperative Extension agent to learn what predators are in your area. I lived on my farm for 35 years with zero predator problems, and then one night in 2008, my entire flock of ram lambs was devoured down to their rib cages by coyotes and a cougar. The cougar came back two weeks later and started in on my ewe flock. I put my sheep behind bars (literally nailed woven wire over all openings in their shed) for two months until I could purchase a couple of livestock guardian dogs. The day the dogs arrived was the last day I've ever worried about my flock at



American blackbelly ram



Barbados blackbelly ram

night. A lot of people have good luck with guardian llamas and donkeys. I have no experience with llamas, but the donkey I had bonded with a newborn lamb and tried to kill its mother.

Guardian dogs all come with their own challenges (barking, digging, jumping, chewing), but my farm is safer with my two Anatolian-Pyrenees crossbreeds.

Depending on the predator pressure, you may not need a guardian animal at all. You may be able to establish

Resources

The Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association Int'l (BBSAI) is the registry for both breeds. You'll find a list of breeders on their website, www.blackbellysheep.org.

The Consortium of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Breeders is a group of dedicated breeders who work cooperatively to conserve this rare breed of sheep. The group provides a map to help you locate breeders at consortium.blackbellysheep.info.

The Blackbelly Listserv is a free email group of more than 250 subscribers. There's a breeder map on their website, www.blackbellysheep.info. You can post a message asking if anyone near you has sheep for sale.

sufficient predator deterrent using stouter/taller fencing or additional electric fencing, but be prepared to make sudden changes if things go awry.

Bringing the sheep home

If you plan to pick the sheep up yourself, you may be able to get by with a homemade enclosure for the back of your pickup truck — a stock rack, an enclosed box with vents, or a wire enclosure with tarp. Maybe you have or can borrow a horse trailer. Whatever you use, obviously it should protect the sheep from wind and weather during the drive home and keep them from jumping out.

Blackbelly sheep travel well. Provide some straw for bedding, minimize slippery surfaces, and consider what you'll feed and water them with during the journey, if necessary.

If you need to hire a long-distance sheep hauler, there are only one or two operating in the U.S. and they aren't cheap, although if you add up your travel costs, you can't haul the sheep yourself for much less.

Although you'll be responsible for paying the hauler, the seller bears the burden of getting a veterinarian's health certificate (which you'll probably be required to pay for), applying ear tags, and loading the sheep on the transport. Ask the seller to also

inspect the area in the transport vehicle to ensure it is dry and that the air is breathable.

When the sheep arrive at your farm, enclose them in a small area to begin with. They need to learn that you are the source of food and that they are safe. Feed them at the same time of day for a couple of days to establish a routine. A little grain now will gain you serious brownie points.

Take this opportunity to thoroughly inspect your new sheep. This may be the last time you'll be able to catch them for quite a while. Inspect their hooves for foot rot and trim their hooves, if necessary (you may need to do this a couple times a year if your soil is soft). Check the udders of the girls to make sure they are soft, supple, and healthy. Check their noses and mouths for signs of discharge (due to pneumonia or other upper respiratory infections). Check their mouths for sore mouth.

Check their eyes for signs of pink-eye. The vet should have done these things when issuing the health certificate, but some vets don't do hands-on inspections. Make sure the sheep are tagged so that you can identify individual animals for record-keeping.

When you let your sheep into a bigger pasture, watch them carefully. Don't add any stress to their environment. Feed them as usual in their

smaller area. Hopefully, they'll be there waiting for you to bring the food.

Why you'll love these sheep

Blackbelly sheep have a scientifically-proven track record for being prolific (on average, two litters of twins every 18 months) and tolerant to parasites. They can carry a worm load that would kill a woolled sheep.

Here in Colorado, I have never had to deworm my flock, and with good pasture rotation you may not need to, either.

There's a lot to be said for not having to shear your sheep. Your back will thank you, and you won't have to struggle to book the local sheep shearer if shearing your own isn't an option. In general, you won't shell out big bucks for vet bills, either. These sheep are tough as nails; they are disease-resistant and hardy.

Blackbelly sheep breed year-round, which allows you to schedule lambing when the temperatures are warmer or when there is a market demand for your lamb. The ewes come into estrus every 17 days, conceive quickly, and lamb 152 days after conception. I breed half of my flock in November (to lamb in April) and half in May (to lamb in October). I keep the rams separate from the ewes except for the 35 days that the ram is introduced for breeding.

Blackbelly sheep rarely need help with lambing. In fact, they rarely let me know when they're about to; I will go out to do chores in the morning and there will be eight additional little legs under the ewe!

You should expect a ewe to produce twins every time except perhaps her first time. Triplets are not uncommon. Blackbelly ewes are excellent mothers. I give them a couple of days in a small lambing pen (a "jug") to form a good bond and to protect the lambs from other ewes' rough treatment, but I admit that this is probably more for my benefit than theirs. I want to be



A few sheets of plywood and some 2x4s will make a perfectly suitable sheep shed.

able to catch the little buggers to get their ear tag applied, and I simply enjoy being near them. It may be the last time I'll handle them until they are sold or are ready to have their hooves trimmed.

Some challenges

Blackbelly sheep are flighty, and even when tamed to eat out of your hand, they will still bolt at sudden movements and regularly refuse to enter a holding pen. You'll want to design a handling system that makes it easy to squeeze them into a small area so that you can catch them individually. I built a board fence three feet inside the back walls of my barn, forming an alley. (I used scrap chainlink until I was sure the plan would work.) I added a couple of gates inside the alley that break it into small lambing jugs, when required. At the end of the alley is a sorting gate. One side lets the sheep outside into the corral; the other side forces a sheep up a ramp and into a head gate for hoof trimming. It's relatively easy to get the sheep into the alley; getting them into the barn in the first place is generally the problem.

I couldn't enjoy my sheep like I do without the help of a herding dog. His built-in instincts, honed by some initial training, make him an invaluable partner. Just as I wouldn't want to build a barn without a table saw, I believe a herding dog is a necessary tool for the job. I've been able to adopt retired herding dogs from professional trainers; check around and get the word out that you are looking. Trainers appreciate being able to rehome their older animals in a working farm with light herding duties.

What to do with them

Blackbelly sheep are good weed eaters and fertilizers (like a regular weed-and-feed). Their manure is lower in nitrogen compared to other animal manure, so it won't burn your plants. Plus, it's a natural slow-



In colder climates, blackbelly sheep grow a woolly winter undercoat that sheds out in the spring.

release fertilizer and is high in phosphorous and potassium.

Blackbelly sheep are great at riding your property of cedar. After eating the needles and small branches, they will chew the bark off the trunk until the trees are girdled. If you plan to use blackbelly sheep to graze your orchard, you'll need to wrap chicken wire around your fruit trees.

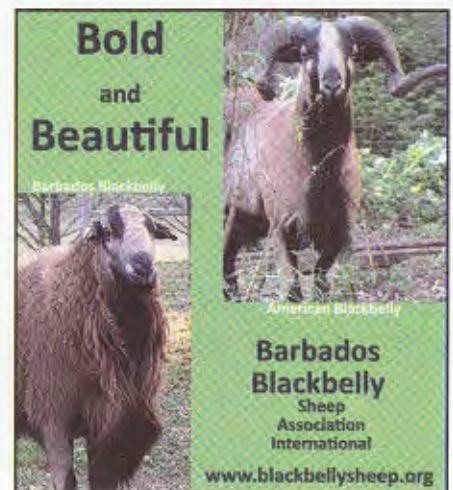
You can sell surplus sheep as breeding stock or as herding stock for dog trainers. American blackbelly rams with good horn growth command top-dollar when sold to hunting ranches.

But before you sell any of your sheep, you should do yourself a favor and butcher a ram lamb for yourself. Choose one about nine months old (but older animals, even up to three years old, taste just fine). Blackbelly lamb is simply gourmet meat. It is mild flavored, extremely tender, and has zero fat. Add no sauces or mint; do nothing to mask the exquisite flavor of the meat. Blackbelly meat is addictive. Once you've tasted it, you'll be a natural evangelist for it and you'll quickly build a clientele for your slaughter lambs.

They will cost you less than woolled sheep; they'll keep the weeds down in the pasture; and their meat will

turn your BBQs into standing-room-only. They are the perfect breed of sheep for homesteaders.

Carol Elkins has raised Barbados blackbelly sheep since 1998, is secretary of the BBSAI, and founder of the Consortium for Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Breeders. Her farm's website, www.critterhaven.biz, contains the largest compendium of information about blackbelly sheep on the Internet. Δ



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