



Barbados Blackbelly rams sport an eye-catching “mane.” Famed in the Caribbean for juicy, non-gamy meat, growers like the breed’s handy size, above average twinning rates, low capital and labor inputs and any-season production.

From the Brink of Extinction Tiny Grower Group’s Plan Earned Big Success

By Carol Elkins, Founder
Consortium of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Breeders

In 2004, there were fewer than 100 Barbados Blackbelly sheep in the U.S.

It took a while for breeders to realize how critical the situation was: Most of us thought there were thousands of these sheep.

The situation only became evident when we called everyone who allegedly raised this exotic-looking polled sheep only to learn that instead, they raised the horned crossbred (eventually referred to as American Blackbelly).

The actual number of living, mature Barbados Blackbelly rams was calculated to be fewer than 12. And those rams were all descendants of two bloodlines.

There was such a demand for breeding stock in those early days that buyers asked breeders to reserve lambs that hadn’t even been conceived yet.

Most of us were hobby breeders who were so new to raising sheep that we hadn’t yet learned how to manage bloodlines or develop sustainable breeding strategies.

Clearly, if the situation was left unchecked, the American population of this historic and uniquely advantageous breed of sheep would disappear totally, or become hopelessly crossbred within a

few years.

We needed to do a bunch of really difficult things:

Identify and register every known Barbados Blackbelly sheep in the U.S. Put breeders in contact with each other and facilitate friendly, sharing communication.

Create an environment in which breeders had priority access to other breeders’ genetics in order to increase the number of bloodlines and create genetic diversity.

Develop a framework in which breeders would all agree to work within a common set of guidelines. We needed to be able to trust each other and have confidence in each other’s sheep, breeding practices, animal husbandry and ethics. Help breeders become better shepherds.

A Breed Preservation Consortium
We started small. A few dedicated breeders across the U.S. formed the original Consortium of Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Breeders.

The Internet was still in its infancy, but we created a Yahoo group with which

to communicate and a web site to attract new members and display the membership requirements.

To support those five difficult tasks, we developed a guiding set of principals that have not changed since 2004. Members of the Barbados Blackbelly Consortium agree that they will

Notify Consortium members when breeding stock (not slaughter stock) are available for sale, giving members first right of refusal before offering the sheep for sale to the public.

Keep careful breeding records and make these flock records available to other Consortium members so that genetic lines may be identified.

Maintain an active membership in the Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association International (BBSAI) or other accepted registry for the breed.

Register all purebred breeding stock.

Practice good animal husbandry and good livestock management techniques to maximize flock health.

Breed stock carefully to preserve the best qualities of the breed, avoid crossbreeding, and prevent undocumented breeding within the breed.

Work with other Consortium members to facilitate cooperative exchange of high-quality breeding stock.

Maintain an interest in learning about breeding techniques and principles of genetics so as to maintain genetic diversity and genetic strength in this rare breed.

Participate in Consortium projects such as genotyping, artificial insemination, etc.

Membership in the Consortium is by invitation only and requires a recommendation from an existing member who has personally spoken to the candidate and described the Consortium’s history, framework and requirements.

The Consortium’s membership has rarely exceeded 24, but over 100 people have come and gone over the years. Some left when they decided to stop raising sheep. Some left because they felt there wasn’t much profit to be made raising a rare breed. Some left or were removed because they chose not to honor their agreement.

Sale Postings Vital

The rule that many former members wrestled with is the requirement to post all available sheep to the Consortium



Barbados Blackbelly ewes. The breed needs no docking, shearing, or crutching and can finish on good grass. They have no entanglement and udder damage is rare, even in brush lands. Unlike the “Barbado,” and American Blackbelly, the Barbados Blackbelly is hornless.

before they sell to the public. This critical rule wasn’t intended to tie anyone’s hands or prevent anyone from finding a market for their stock: In the early days of the Consortium, the only way new members could acquire stock was by being alerted when a member had stock for sale.

When posting sheep for sale, members

- Identify the sheep—date of birth, sire and dam, registration number, etc.

- Set the price and terms of sale, and
- Set a deadline for members to respond if they’re interested.

Members ask any questions about the sheep *publicly* so everyone receives the same information.

At deadline, the seller states who the sheep will be sold to and takes the conversation offline to work out transportation and payment details. If no one has indicated an interest in the sheep, then the member can sell the sheep to the public.

As of August 2017, there are over 3,000 registered Barbados Blackbelly sheep.

Even though there is no longer any backlog of available sheep for new members, the requirement to give Consortium members priority access to available breeding stock is still followed. It has become a “bellwether” that often reflects a breeder’s level of integrity: If a breeder goes back on his or her word to follow this rule, then it’s possible he or she has chosen to renege on other commitments as well, thereby endangering breed conservation.

Census, Benefits of Inside Info

Every autumn, Consortium members are asked to report a census of their flock size. We estimate that Consortium members own almost 40 percent of the Barbados

Blackbelly sheep currently living and are breeders of most of rest.

The census also helps identify members who are no longer actively engaged in Consortium e-mail. If they don’t respond to the request for census data after three reminders over the course of a month, they are simply unsubscribed from the Yahoo group, essentially removing them from Consortium membership.

The requirements for Consortium membership aren’t as onerous as they may sound. Breeders simply do what they promised to do when they first joined. There are perks to Consortium membership that help offset the “burden” of writing an occasional e-mail about their sheep.

Consortium members are invited to participate in teleconferences hosted by leading experts in sheep conservation and husbandry, such as Dr. Phil Sponenberg (author of several excellent books on conservation genetics); Dr. Stephan Wildeus (principal investigator and manager of Virginia State University’s research flock of Barbados Blackbelly sheep); Nathan Griffith (editor of the popular magazine *sheep!*); Dr. Harvey Blackburn (director of the National Animal Germplasm Program); and Dr. Jim Morgan (past president of the National Sheep Improvement Program).

Consortium members get to participate in research projects, such as Oklahoma State University’s codon 171 scrapie resistance research and Virginia State University’s innovative artificial insemination techniques.

But most importantly, Consortium members enjoy the camaraderie and support of like-minded breeders who are eager to share their knowledge and experience with Barbados Blackbelly sheep.

Building and maintaining a Consortium of breeders is done the same way shepherds build and maintain their sheep flocks:

- Only good quality members are brought into the group.

- Members are continually nourished with good information and opportunities, so they grow to their full potential as sheep breeders.

- By culling non-participating members and members who evidence behaviors detrimental to the group and the breed, the Consortium remains populated with members of the highest integrity, who are dedicated to breed conservation.

The Consortium has developed a reputation over the years of being the best place to find breeders with the best sheep for sale. Its web site analytics verify the site’s popularity and usefulness to other sheep enthusiasts.



These Barbados Blackbelly sheep are in the process of shedding of their short but insulative winter coat. The breed was worth saving for its many practical advantages, especially for part-time growers with limited time for chores.

An Ongoing Recovery

The Consortium’s recipe for breed conservation has proven very successful, increasing the Barbados Blackbelly breed’s population by over 2,900 percent in a mere 13 years.

The breed is still suffering from significant interrelatedness, but as new flocks are sold and new combinations of genetics created, its genetic diversity will increase. An influx of animals from the Virginia State University flock provided desperately needed bloodlines. And we hope that soon members will be allowed to import sheep, or at least germplasm, from Mexico.

The Consortium’s model hopefully can be used by other groups dedicated to rescuing endangered breeds and be enjoyed with the same level of success.

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