

Ten Things A Buyer Should ask and a Seller Should be Ready to Answer

Guidelines to Choosing Your Seller

1. **What are the bio-security practices of this farm?** If a potential seller doesn't have an answer to this question, then you should keep farm shopping. The most efficient way to bring a sheep disease into your own flock, is to buy it in with new sheep. What disinfectant does the shepherd use on visitors' footwear? Does she include her vet and shearer in her bio-security protocol? (Remember that both can be very efficient vectors for the transmission of certain diseases and pests.) Does the shepherd ever take her sheep off the farm and then bring them back home? If so, what quarantine practices does she use on their return?

2. **What are the breeding priorities of the farm?** Is it meat? Fiber? Breeding stock? Milk? Or perhaps some combination of some or all of these? Try to match the priorities of your seller's farm, to the priorities that you have set for your own flock. A farm that is looking to milk for farmstead cheese for instance, will have different priorities and selection standards than a farm that is planning to sell naturally raised lamb. If a shepherd cannot clearly state the breeding goals for her farm, or if they are very different than yours, then keep looking until you do find a good match.

3. **What health or disease challenges does this farm face now or has faced in the past?** Every farm has something that is of concern, so be sure to ask this question. It may be as simple as fiddling to balance the rations for the bred ewes, or as serious as foot rot, but this is something you will need to find out when you are farm shopping. Johnies disease, foot rot, OPP, and scrapie, are very serious diseases that we all want to avoid. Pink Eye, (conjunctivitis), sore mouth and abortion diseases, while more manageable, are still something that you will want to discuss. Educate yourself on what, if any, diseases or health concerns have been at issue on your seller's farm.

4. **What is the worming protocol of this farm?** How often does the shepherd dose the sheep and what wormers does she use? This is becoming increasingly important as we read about resistant parasites. Remember that even a ewe that is wormed as she is leaving her old farm, can still carry unhatched eggs in her gut. These eggs will hatch into worms which then drop eggs onto your fields and paddocks, so it is very important to avoid buying resistant worms. (Note that this is why it is a good idea to worm sheep again after they arrive at your farm.) Discuss this with your seller, including the worming history of the flock, and if possible, of an individual animal. This is valuable information that you will need in order to manage the sheep at your own farm.

5. **What are the selection criteria for breeding animals at this farm? And in what order of priority?** A focused and thoughtful breeder should have this answer on the tip of her tongue. These should be the guidelines that drive her choices all year long, so she should not have to think hard to answer this question. If she cannot list her guidelines for selecting breeders, then she probably has not been making consistent or thoughtful breeding choices. We all have pets in our flocks, but the majority of the ewes on a farm should be there on merit, rather than sentiment. If there are sentimental choices, then the shepherd should still be able to explain the animals' good and bad points and why she likes them. As an example of a selection trait list, ours is listed here in order of priority:

a.) General vigor, health and soundness. Any animal that fails this first test must leave the breeding flock, and this includes heat or parasite intolerance, as well as bad horns on the rams. (Note that we let our oldest girls go into a peaceful retirement, so as they fail here due to old age, they move over into the pet category.)

b./c.) Good size and conformation. These are traits with ever-increasing baselines as we continuously work to improve them in our flock.

c./b.) Strong maternal qualities. Ewes that don't mother well just can't stay. Fertility, ease of lambing, milkiness, and a strong will to claim and defend her lambs, all fall into this broad maternal category.

Note that these two traits are really tied in terms of importance. We don't want well built ewes that can't mother, and we don't want fertile little bunnies without a real build on their bones.

d.) Quality and quantity of fleece.

e.) Color and pattern.

6. On the flip side of selection guidelines, what are the farm's criteria for culling? Culling is critical to maintaining and improving the soundness of a flock, and you need to ask about the farm's culling standards. Again, if the shepherd cannot answer that question easily and smoothly, then she has not been culling her flock on any specific plan, or worse yet, has not been culling at all. Husbandry of a livestock breed involves culling, and a farm that does not cull is either using their culls for breeding, or selling their culls to others. As a buyer, both of those situations are disastrous for you and for your flock. A conscientious shepherd can and will explain her culling standards to you, and should be able to list specific animals or family lines that have been culled, and why. (Note that culling can sometimes mean just castrating a ram and selling him as a wether, rather than as a breeding ram.)

7. What is the price scale for breed stock on this farm? What criteria goes into the price scale? This is a fair question that a seller should be comfortable answering. Every farm has a different approach to pricing, and you can learn a lot about the standards and priorities of a farm by discussing their price scale.

8. What health or fertility guarantee does the seller offer, and under what conditions will the seller replace an animal? Every farm can have a different answer to this question, so it is best to ask before you make a purchase. For how long is the health guaranteed? What will happen if the animal falls ill, and what does the seller expect you to do? For instance, a seller's guarantee of health may end if you either do not call her during the illness, or if you do not take her advice or that of your vet. ~ What about fertility? If an animal does not reproduce, what will the seller do for you as compensation and when? Does the seller take unsatisfactory animals back, or will she ask you to cull the animal and then offer you a replacement? This part of a buyer/seller relationship can get sticky if there is a problem, so it is best to be clear about the seller's policies before the sheep leave her farm.

9. Does the seller have a consulting vet, and will the animal come with a full health check? Every animal that crosses state lines must have an interstate health certificate, as required by the USDA. Does the farm vet do a hands-on health check for each animal, or does he/she write the certificate based only on their knowledge of the seller's farm? Be aware that for very large purchases, the health certificate may speak more toward the general health of the farm, than to the soundness of each individual animal. If that is so in your purchase situation, then ask if the seller will still guarantee the soundness and health of each sheep. Also know that the requirements for certificates are more lenient if buyer and seller are both in-state.

10. Will the seller supply buyer support? Questions or problems can arise in any purchase, and will the seller be available to help you should you need it? Find out at what times of day can you call. Every household has a different schedule, so ask before you call either too late or too early. Will the seller be too busy to help on the phone at certain times, or does she prefer to answer questions via email? Remember that it is a two-way street; if a seller considers buyer support to be part of the deal, then she will also expect you to take her advice, or that of her vet, if you ask her for it. ~ I have had long, friendly relationships with buyers and with the sellers for my own purchases, and consider them both to be one of the joys of raising sheep.