

Breeders Establishing "Curlylock" Wensleydales In North America

Wensleydales, an old British sheep breed known for its curlylocks, is being established in North America. The breed is known for its size (ewes top 300 lbs.), mothering, scrapie resistance, and fine, long staple corkscrew wool fibers.

"The wool is wonderful to work with for both spinners and felters," says Kay Kratz, Oconomowoc, Wis. "It has a natural luster and picks up dyes beautifully."

Kratz has a mix of colors in her flock, with as many as 11 different shades from jet black to pure silver. She shears part of the flock every six months to provide shorter locks to the spinning market and the rest of the flock once a year for long locks for the felting market. Raw wool sells for \$7.50/lb., while wool processed for spinning runs \$30/lb.

With ringlets down to their feet and fleeces of up to 20 lbs. on a yearling, and more as they mature, Wensleydales produce a lot of wool. Unfortunately, until recently there were no Wensleydales to be had in North America. Kratz is one of seven charter members of the North American Wensleydale Sheep Association (NAWSA) who have been trying to change that situation. It's a slow process.

It was difficult importing sheep prior to the hoof and mouth disease outbreak,

and now it is impossible. Only recently have the doors for semen importation reopened. Since 1999, Kratz and others have been crossing select sheep breeds with Wensleydale semen and then back crossing in hopes of establishing flocks of "near" purebred Wensleydales. Today she has more than 60 ewes with 50 percent or greater Wensleydale bloodlines. This spring she will be breeding a set of twins that are 93 percent Wensleydale. Their lambs will be 96 7/8 percent purebred and registered as purebred North American Wensleydales.

NAWSA founders started their flocks using artificial insemination on purebred registered Cotswold, Lincoln or Leicester Longwools. Today interested breeders can do the same or start with registered cross-bred rams (75 percent or greater) or ewe lambs (50 percent or greater). The association requires the first and final cross to be done through AI with semen imported from Great Britain.

Kratz has sold 50 percent ewes for \$250 and 68 percent ewes for \$300 to \$350. She has sold 68 percent rams for \$350 and a few 75 percent ram lambs for \$350. Her prices are considerably less than at least one other breeder on the Internet, but she prefers to keep her prices low.

"I want the breed to be recognized, and the



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only way to do that is to sell them at reasonable prices," says Kratz.

The Wensleydales are easy keepers, doing well on pasture in the summer and only receiving grain at breeding. Kratz has had success breeding her cross breeds in the spring as well as in the fall. This year she bred one group of ewes in August.

Mature flocks average 250 percent lambing rates with even ewe lambs commonly producing twins. The breed is naturally polled

and Kratz reports no hoof problems or scrapie (a sheep disease) problems.

"Wensleydales naturally have the highest resistance to scrapie of all recognized sheep breeds," she says.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Gray Haven Hills, Kay Kratz, W379 N8504 Mill Street, Oconomowoc, Wis. 53066 (ph 262 569-9701; email: kkratz@wensleydales.com).

Profitable Lavender Business Thrives On 14 Acres

Lavender is a high value, low maintenance perennial crop that offers a good return on investment, according to Jody Byrne of Streetsboro, Ohio. She knows from experience that this useful plant offers distinct advantages from a farming perspective.

"One acre of lavender will yield well for 8 to 10 years. An acre supports 34 rows of 80 plants," Byrne explains. "It takes three years from when 4-in. cuttings are planted until the first full harvest. Peak harvest is at about five years. Preliminary harvests may happen as soon as one year."

With a 14-acre plot in an expanding suburban area, she and husband Michael Slyker co-founded and operate DayBreak Lavender Farm. Byrne's daughter, granddaughter, and 11 seasonal employees complete the successful operation that has been called "a mixture of farming, marketing and artistry."

Byrne says average return on investment, for fresh or dried bundled lavender, is about \$13,600 per acre (\$5 per dried 2-in. bundle from each plant.) Peak harvest is 2 1/2 bundles per plant x 2,720 plants x \$5 = \$34,000 per acre.

"But the demand for our bath and body products is so great that we don't sell lavender bundles any more. We use it all!" she says. A "lab" in the basement of her home serves as her production center for a wide variety of lavender products.

"Demand outstrips supply for organic, farm-grown lavender and it's growing in direct proportion to the consumer's demand for all things natural."

Byrne calls lavender the "Swiss Army Knife of herbs" because it can be used and sold for crafts, cooking, perfumery, health and healing aids, bath and beauty products.

When taken as a tea, lavender has been used to treat insomnia, depression, stress, headaches, and a variety of gastrointestinal ailments.

DayBreak produces garden-fresh spa and skin-care luxuries such as herbal soaps, botanical spa bars, all-natural crème lotions, bath teas, culinary herbal blends (lavender-infused culinary spices, sugars and honey) and homekeeping supplies such as beeswax and lavender furniture wax.

To do well, lavender requires a lot of sun, excellent drainage, and sweet, alkaline soil. Byrne amended a former cow pasture with organic, timed-release lime.

She cautions against planting seeds, as they are never true to variety, and instead, advises buying inexpensive starter plants in two-inch pots until you can make your own cuttings.

She planted her first lavender in 2000, and after first selling her products independently with great success, began wholesaling through retail stores in the spring of 2002. Demand for DayBreak's wide range of lavender products has been phenomenal.

A handful of stores in Ohio carry DayBreak products, but the family also sells at farmers' markets, directly from their farm at open houses, and via their website.

DayBreak's website is a storehouse of information and pictures, and one section is a treasure trove of detailed growing tips and instructions specifically for farmers who are considering getting into lavender.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, DayBreak Lavender Farm, Jody Byrne, 2129 Frost Rd., Streetsboro, Ohio 44241 (ph 330 626-3235; fax 330 626-1749; email: Soapplease1@aol.com; website: www.soapplease.com).



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