

California Red Sheep Produce Great Wool

California Red sheep were originally bred for meat but some lines now produce prize-winning wool as well. Elizabeth Ferraro and her son Leonard have won state wool competitions.

“We’re in the fleece business and selling breeding stock,” says Elizabeth Ferraro. “We breed for fleece quality and body confirmation.”

The relatively new breed (selected from Tunis and Barbados crosses in the 1970’s) has a reputation for lean, delicate meat produced on just hay and grass. Rams range from 225 to 250 lbs. and ewes from 130 to 150 lbs. The breed is polled, so horns aren’t a problem. The fat-tailed sheep may need docking.

The wool is silky in texture and not as super fine as Merino. It has low levels of lanolin, making it easy to shear. Lambs are born red. Mature fleece has light oatmeal to faint raspberry undertones with light gold to cinnamon red hairs intermixed. The head, belly and legs have short, red hair. Ferrari says the fleece is popular with hand spinners, weavers and fiber artists.

“We sell our skirted fleece for \$21 per lb., and we have a waiting list,” says Ferraro. “We will get a 3-lb. fleece from a small ewe and as much as a 9-lb. fleece from a large ram.”

Ferraro cautions prospective buyers that not all California Reds have the same quality fleece. The fleeces on her sheep have changed from coarse rug wool to finer sweater and knitting wool in the 13 years she has bred and selected for better wool. Other flocks selected for other traits may not produce as much or even a similar quality fleece. In fact, it was other traits that attracted Ferraro to California Reds.

“I was 65 when I bought my first sheep, fulfilling a life long dream to own sheep,”



California Red sheep are a relatively new breed that produces lean, delicate meat on just hay and grass. The head, belly and legs have short, red hair. Lambs are born red.

she recalls. “I wanted a gentle sheep, easy to work with and resistant to parasites and foot rot. I’ve never had a problem with their feet, and at 78 years old, I can walk into the pen with my 12 rams and never worry about being hit or any hostility. All they want is to be scratched.”

Ferraro also appreciated the breed’s reputations as good mothers. Lack of wool on the belly makes it easy for lambs to nurse. Twins are expected, and triplets are common, though Ferraro doesn’t select for that trait.

California Reds will breed out of season, and they remain productive for years. The breed is very adaptable to the weather, says Ferraro. A few years ago she moved her flock from New Jersey to a farm in northeast New York, not far from the Canadian border.

“They did fine in the warm and humid New Jersey climate as well as here,” she adds. “Quite a few have been exported to the United Arab Emirates, and I understand they’re doing well in that heat.”

Ferraro advises prospective buyers to look for sheep from different bloodlines. She maintains 8 to 10 separate bloodlines.

“When people buy lambs from me for breeding, I suggest they buy 3 ewes and preferably 2 rams, each from different lines,”



she says. “Then they’re independent and can maintain 2 lines using one ram on the lambs of the other.”

The California Red breed registry was closed for many years and now has been reopened for crossing with the originating breeds. While some flocks like Ferraro’s are closed (no new bloodlines introduced), others may have reintroduced Tunis and Barbados bloodlines. Ferraro suggests that doesn’t mean they are the same, even if they can be registered as California Reds.

“The original breeders were very careful to select the traits they wanted,” she says. “It isn’t a simple cross.”

If considering buying California Reds, she suggests paying close attention to the breed standard and selecting for confirmation and breed characteristics.

Ferraro sells ewe lambs for \$350 each and ram lambs for \$450. A yearling ram lamb sells for \$500 and a proven breeder-ram will sell for \$600.

“Groups of 5 or more receive a 10 percent discount,” says Ferraro. “The buyer pays for health certificates and transportation.”

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“Jail Cell” Built Inside Barn Protects Collectables

If jail cells can keep thieves in once they’re arrested, Dave Nicholas figured they could also be used to keep thieves out. So he set out to learn how jail cell bars are made and built a cell to protect his collection of antique tools.

He built the 28 by 14-ft. enclosure inside a pole barn, based on jail cell plans he saw while working in western South Dakota and Wyoming. The bars are hollow pipes with solid bars inside that spin if someone attempts to cut them, Nicholas says.

He used 3/4-in. conduit with 1/2-in. rebar inside. He drilled holes in 2 by 6’s between

pole barn posts to slip the conduit through, and didn’t attach the conduit at the top so they can spin. Nicholas even ran the bars in the ceiling for added security. He notes the walls can be insulated and finished normally, if desired. His final touch was a 980-lb. double vault door on the opening.

He admits he revels in doing things differently and on the cheap. Knowing his antiques are secure makes his cell creation even more valuable.

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Dave Nicholas set out to learn how jail cell bars are made and then built a 28 by 14-ft. locked enclosure inside his pole barn. He uses it to keep antique collectables secure.