

## Curly Karakuls May Be The World's Oldest Sheep Breed

Karakul sheep with their long, curly fleece and tight curls on lambs are still popular after thousands of years. The younger the lamb, the tighter the curl, which means that some day-old lambs are harvested for their pelts. When raised to maturity, the wool is in demand for rugs and felting.

"Persian rugs are made from Karakul fleece," says Deanna Perera, breeder and owner of the American Karakul Sheep Registry (AKSR). "It makes an excellent fiber, very strong, and it wears well. It holds dyes very well with gray fiber dying in vibrant colors."

She explains that Karakuls produce either a single or double coat, with a 3 to 3 1/2-lb. fleece from a single coat adult. Double coat adults produce a 4 to 5-lb. fleece. Prices vary by color and fiber.

"Most fleeces sell for about \$5 per lb. off the animal unless they are really super soft or otherwise special," says Perera. "If you shear a yearling, you can get 10-in. long locks with curls on the end."

Perera and others like the double coat for felting. "It practically felts itself," she says. "The inner coat is fine, and the top coat consists of guide hairs. Put them together and it makes a wonderful felt."

Karakuls are native to central Asia and believed to have been raised there for more than 3,000 years. Images of the sheep with the distinctive curly fleece have been found on ancient temples. Perera notes that the lamb pelts are still in high demand in that region. She adds that Karakul meat is very popular with people originally from the region.

"There are non purebred breeders who produce meat for that market," she says. "Often they cross Karakul with Navaho-Churros or other breeds."

In addition to fiber sales, Perera sells her Karakuls for breeding stock. She maintains multiple bloodlines to prevent inbreeding. She says the registry can trace purebred Karakuls bloodlines in the U.S. to the 1930's. She estimates there are only around 20 purebred breeders left in the country and as few as 2,000 registered sheep.

"Those of us who have them are careful



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where they go to make sure the bloodlines are continued," says Perera. "Most buyers are small farm owners interested in preserving the breed."

Karakuls are a tall sheep breed with ewes ranging from 100 to 150 lbs. and rams running from 175 to 225 lbs. Ewes breed out of season, making 3 lambs in 2 years possible. Twins are not uncommon. They have a strong flocking instinct and will form a circle with lambs in the middle if threatened. However, they do not respond to herding dogs.

"They will not work with dogs, but I can lead mine anywhere with a pail and a little feed in it," says Perera.

Most Karakuls are born with a lustrous coal-black fleece, but many gradually turn brown or a shade of gray. Other color strains can be white, gray or brown at birth.

As keeper of the registry, Perera says she doesn't sell her own breeding stock to people contacting her through the registry website. Instead, she directs them to other breeders. When she does sell breeding stock to a new breeder, she recommends buying a set of 5 ewes and a ram.

"Ewes sell for around \$300 each, and depending on his horns and other attributes, a ram can go for \$300 to \$400," says Perera.

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## Camel Milk Makes Creamy Soap

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

I love the color and designs of Amber Blakeslee's handmade soap. With names like Butterfly Flower and Tropical Resort, they look almost too pretty to use. But appearance isn't the only thing unique about her soaps. She makes them out of camel's milk.

They added camels to their 7-acre Milford, Indiana, homestead as a way to control the grass without having to mow it. "We wanted versatile livestock that could be productive in multiple ways," says Luke Blakeslee. Though their 5 camels don't manage the grass as well as they hoped, Blakeslee says they are happy with their decision to purchase them a few years ago after riding camels, attending a hands-on training clinic, and speaking with owners of other camel dairies.

"Camels do well in a variety of climates," Blakeslee says, from hot climates in the South to cold climates in Canada. The Blakeslees have shelter for them to get out of the weather and are renovating the barn to make it even nicer for newborn calves. Camels thrive on poor forage such as weeds, twigs and leaves, so Blakeslee monitors the grass to make sure it isn't too rich, and supplements with grain and minerals the camels need. They are fed orchard grass hay through the winter.

"They require a lot of loose salt. They scoop up mouthfuls," Blakeslee says. "We give them Himalayan salt, and that makes their milk salty."

The biggest challenge is milking.

"They are very tame about being milked, but the longest let down has been 2 minutes and 12 seconds," Blakeslee says. "You do what you can." Currently he milks twice a day by hand or with a milker. Each camel has a unique temperament and the amount of milk varies from 2 to 6 pints per milking.

After filtering the milk three times, it is frozen until Amber makes soap. She made her first soaps in 2015, with purchased camel milk as a way to earn money to buy camels. With 10 times the iron and three times more Vitamin C than cow's milk, camel milk has essential natural antioxidants that promote healthy skin and prevent dryness.

"Customers say it is a lot creamier than other soaps and lathers very nicely," Blakeslee says. "The milk is light and absorbs into the skin very quickly. It combines nicely



**"Customers say our colorful handmade camel milk is a lot creamier than other soaps and lathers nicely," says Amber Blakeslee. "The milk is light and absorbs into the skin very quickly."**



with luxury oils."

They offer tours, and they hope to expand the business to sell camel ice cream. The name of the farm, River Jordan, is a statement of faith symbolizing healing, he says. For the Blakeslees, producing quality products from camel milk is part of that, while raising their young children and animals on their rural property.

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## Raising Butterflies For Fun And Profit

Raising butterflies can be profitable - it's a \$70 million business annually in the U.S. But people who raise butterflies typically are motivated by more than money. They are passionate about the environment and restoring butterfly habitat. Euchee Butterfly Farm in Leonard, Okla., is a good example.

It started as a fun diversion when David Bohlken raised butterflies while working on his family's Minnesota Christmas tree farm. In the mid 90's he learned he could sell butterflies and started taking out ads in bird and nature publications. By 1996, he and his wife, Jane Breckinridge, had a tent with butterflies at the Minnesota State Fair. In 2018, more than 71,000 people went through their Butterfly House.

In 2004, the couple moved to 160 acres in Oklahoma that has been in Breckinridge's family for five generations. It also happens to be along the butterfly migration route and in the heart of tribal

lands. The couple named their farm Euchee, after Breckinridge's great-great grandfather who was the last Euchee chief.

"We raise butterflies for sale and help others do it," Breckinridge says. Part of that is education about food sources and bringing back traditional plants with the help of the seven tribes involved with the Tribal Environmental Action for Monarchs. With much hard work they have established a seedbank of 154 native wildflowers that provide necessary nectar and food. Many of the varieties had been preserved on prairie remnant on Euchee Butterfly Farm land. The farm also has demonstration plots of nectar rich flowers such as zinnias and Mexican sunflowers.

Different butterfly caterpillars eat different foods, Breckinridge says. Monarchs feed on nectariferous plants on the journey to Mexico, and when heading north they lay eggs on milkweed. Euchee Butterfly Farm raises several species of butterflies that eat other

plants. Buckeye eat narrow leaf plantain that is grown in trays. Painted Ladies eat thistle. Swallowtails eat fennel or dill.

"Some things we grow out in flats that go in the cages with the caterpillar," Breckinridge explains, noting that other caterpillars are placed in mesh sleeves on trees to feed on leaves.

The farm has buildings and greenhouses set up with mesh containers for developing caterpillars. Like any farm with "livestock", the facilities are kept clean and healthy, and caterpillars are fed nutritious food. Work is underway to add three more buildings to increase capacity and provide space for education. Part of that is working with farmers and landowners to raise awareness of restoring habitat.

Euchee Butterfly Farm sells to clients with butterfly houses, botanical gardens and wildlife conservation and for flight houses and release events, such as cancer center fundraisers. The common Painted Lady

butterflies are usually released. Even if they don't increase the local population, releases are valuable, Breckinridge says.

"They raise awareness. We let people know butterflies are in trouble. It's a net win, because people will reduce pesticide use and let milkweed grow," she says. "It comes down to rural people and the choices they make."

Raising butterflies is a lot of work, but is rewarding, Breckinridge says.

"We are so grateful doing this work," she says. "It brings joy and meaning to people."

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