Is sheep care part of your future? Can you raise sheep in a large backyard? In some cases the answer is yes. Sheep are adaptable and can be cared for in a paddock or small field if their needs are met. It may be a little more labor intensive and take a bit more effort and management to raise our sheep this way. Here on the farm we raise a little bit of everything. Well not really everything. But we do have quite a variety of animals. We have successfully raised goats for many years, a small herd of beef cattle and my sweet little herd of sheep.
Did you think that you have to have a large pasture of grassy grazing land in order to raise sheep? We don’t have any grazing other than the grass surrounding the different areas of the farm. We have successfully raised a small flock of sheep for the past six years. Here’s what we have learned about sheep care and how we do it.

**Have a Shelter**

The shelter for sheep can be simple. They will do quite well with a three sides open shed, sometimes called a run in shed. Our small flock of four sheep actually have access to a stall in the barn but prefer to spend most of their time outside in the pen area.
Fenced Area

When keeping sheep on a small homestead, make sure you have adequate fencing to keep the sheep from getting into the roads or the neighbor’s gardens. We are using board fencing, but actually a wire fence will work for sheep, too.

Some people have success raising sheep using the netting type fences. When we first tried netting fences with our flock, they kept getting tangled up in the netting. I still think it can be a viable option, as many shepherds use this type of fence.

Feeding

Sheep are grazing animals. If you had a large pasture, they would eat grass all day long, stopping only to rest and allow the rumen to process the grass. This is called chewing the cud. Since our sheep spend a large part of their time in a
pen, they are fed a grass hay. They react pretty much the same to the hay as they would to grass. They eat, then rest and ruminate. We do feed a small amount of grain to make sure they are getting enough nutrition and vitamins.

It is important to feed hay with grain so that the rumen does not become inflamed. When choosing hay for non-lactating sheep, choose a grass hay and not an alfalfa. Alfalfa has a high percentage of protein, and since it is not needed, can lead to urinary tract problems. It can be easy to want to over feed grain. Sheep will insist that they are still very hungry! Look at the condition of your sheep. If they are nicely filled out they are getting enough to eat. The majority of their diet should be grasses and hay.

**Cleaning the Sheep Pen**

Since we do not have pastures for rotational grazing, we do need to clean up after them in the pen. Old hay is raked up and removed along with feces and any wet moist spots. Replace the bedding in the stall or shed as needed to keep it clean and free of insects. Smelly, wet, dirty bedding is a breeding ground for insects, parasites, worms and disease.

**Free Grazing Time**

When we are on the farm we give the sheep time to leave their pen and roam freely. They can browse and graze on grass and various forage. One of our large grassy fields is available now that we are no longer raising cattle. Since there is a large open cattle shed in the field, the sheep can spend all day lounging around and grazing as they wish. We do still bring them back to the barn at night, although with some fencing improvements, they would be fine staying in the field at night, too.
Water

Make sure the sheep have access to fresh water in buckets or a low water trough at all times. Try to keep some water in a shady location so it can stay cooler during the hot weather.
Worming

Keeping the sheep in a smaller area can lead to an abundance of parasites. Instead of worming on a schedule, we have switched to worming when there is a problem. Good management
of your flock includes observing and checking them individually on a regular basis. Look for paleness in gums and lower eyelids for indication of a parasite problem. Some shepherds will choose to worm on a routine basis as part of their sheep care plan. Since we have such a small flock, we prefer to worm when necessary and avoid increasing the resistance to some worming products.

**Grooming – an Important Part of Sheep Care**
With sheep care for a small herd there are some jobs you will probably want to just do yourself, rather than hire someone. Trimming hooves, checking for teeth problems, checking
overall condition are some things to keep in mind. Starting at an early age, train your sheep to be comfortable being handled. Hold their feet even if no trimming is needed. Inspect for stones or any softness or problems in the hoof. Check eye lids or gums regularly for healthy pink color.

Shearing Time is Part of Sheep Care

Most sheep being raised for wool will require a once a year shearing. In some cases, with a heavy fiber producer you may be able to shear twice. Even with a small flock, doing the shearing yourself can be backbreaking. We did all of our own shearing of our fiber goats and sheep for many years. Then we hired a professional one year and I will never go back to doing it myself! Our sheep shearer does the job in much less time and yields better fleeces. I am glad to know that I can shear if I have to. It’s an important part of sheep care. But knowing a professional and getting on their schedule will make your life with sheep much more enjoyable. If you choose to do it yourself, consider attending a sheep shearing school to learn the tricks of the trade.
You can check out our available yarns here.
Why We Keep Sheep

We raise our fiber goats and sheep for the beautiful fleece. After shearing, I will pick through the fleece to remove any badly matted parts or debris. This is called “skirting”, and is a very important first step. I ship or drop the fleece off with a fiber processor to have it made into yarn. Some shepherds will want to do the entire process themselves,
including skirting, picking, washing, combing, drafting and spinning. Someday I hope to learn more of the steps but for right now I am doing what I can.

With a little more thought and adjusting the management style, it can be possible to learn sheep care and keep a small number of sheep on a small homestead. If you want to learn more about how we raise fiber animals for our yarn business, read this post. Let me know how you have raised sheep and learned to do sheep care on small farms and homesteads.
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