

Selecting and Feeding Market Lambs

Spring is upon us and it's time to select your next market lambs and begin the feeding process for county fair. As you make your selection you need to think about the project for a bit and decide your project goals. Of course, we all want to exhibit the champion lamb but that is impossible for all of us to have the champion every year. Establish your goals for the project and understand what it takes to reach these goals.

You will need to consider the financial requirements when setting your goals. Prospect lambs can cost from \$150 to \$500 or more depending on the demand at a particular auction. You should consider purchasing at least 2 project lambs as they will do better with some company. Once you have purchased a lamb, you will need \$160 to \$350 to purchase feed for 2 lambs, depending on your feed choice and the size of the lambs you start with. Lambs are usually purchased when they are at least 8 weeks old and from 40-60 pounds. A lamb should gain from .4 to .8 lbs. a day during your feeding period, and it will take 300 to 400 pounds of feed per lamb. Each lamb will gain differently, but on average lambs gain 1 pound for every 7 pounds of feed they eat. Be sure to purchase a lamb that is big enough to meet the weight requirements of your county fair. The producer you purchase your lamb from should be able to help you determine the size of a lamb you need to start.

As with any meat animal project muscle is the most important factor to consider when purchasing a lamb, but that is not to say that structural soundness is not important. When selecting a lamb look for one that has a large rack and loin, indicating ample muscle down its top, with a full thick leg. Select a lamb that is long and level down its top with a long hindsaddle (hindsaddle includes loin and rump). Find a lamb that stand correctly and moves out comfortably on its feet and legs. Remember that little structural problem with a small animal will become a more obvious problem as the animal gets bigger and carries more weight. Try to select a lamb that is smooth and trim up through its shoulder and chest area and blends nicely into a long neck. Once again, the breeder you have chosen should help you when selecting your lambs.

When purchasing lambs be sure to check with the breeder to see if their vaccinations are up to date and that they have, at a minimum, been vaccinated for enterotoxaemia (*Clostridium perfringens* C and D, commonly known as overeating). If they have not had the type C&D vaccination it is important that you get with your veterinarian and get them vaccinated as soon as possible, preferably prior to starting your lamb on grain. You may also want to get them vaccinated for tetanus. When starting them on grain it is important to start them slowly and gradually increase the grain in their diet. It takes some time for the rumen microbes to adjust to a ration contain grain after you have been feeding a high roughage ration. Start by giving your lamb about one fourth to one third pound of grain daily for 3-5 days while keeping them on good quality hay. Then increase the amount of grain in their daily ration by about ¼ pound wait another 3-5 day and increase it again until you have reached about 2.5 to 3 pounds of grain a day. It is important to remember, the amount will vary depending on the size of you lamb. A rule of thumb is that a lamb should eat all his grain within 15 to 20 minutes after being fed. Evaluate your feeding program as your lamb grows and make adjustment to control the amount of fat

being laid on over the rib. Keep in mind that you should never feed goat feed to a lamb, as it will likely be high in copper and can cause death in lambs.

Throughout the feeding period you should check your lambs at least daily, but twice daily is preferred. Look for signs of illness, injury and changes in behavior. Check your facilities for loose wire, nails or other object that could injure your lambs. Most importantly, check to see that they have plenty of fresh clean water. As the summer heat increases and rains begin your lambs will be looking for places to get out of the weather. Make sure that lambs have a warm place to avoid wind, rain, and snow in the early spring, and a cool shady place as the outside temperature rises. If your lambs have never been shorn, you might think strongly about getting them out of their wool in early summer to help keep them cool. Remember lambs can be bothered by flies and insects, so talk with your veterinarian about control of these pests, especially and immediately following shearing.

Lambs need plenty of exercise during the feeding period. You should walk them daily to help develop muscle, reduce excess fat, stimulate their appetite and get them used to being on a halter. If lambs have a large area for exercise during the entire feeding program they may not need a forced exercise program. Remember that exercise is for a lamb's health and well being, and too much exercise can be as bad as not enough. It is important to have in mind what a healthy, top quality lamb looks like. From time to time you will have question about your lamb project and you need to plan ahead to have someone that you can trust to help you with your project. A more experienced member of your club or the breeder of your lambs can both be good resources for you to get information. Your local extension agent will be happy to help you as well. Always remember, it is better to ask questions early than to wait until the problem becomes overwhelming. Good Luck!