



KIM GOODLING

Sheepish Beginnings

My husband and I came to Vermont over 30 years ago to embrace rural living and raise a family. Sheep entered our lives halfway through an 18-year stretch of homeschooling our children. We wanted our children to know what it was like to grow their own food, get their hands dirty, and care for living creatures. After a couple years of research and questions, we brought home our first flock of sheep and fully embraced all that animal husbandry in Vermont had to offer.

Through the years we learned as we went. As my husband says, “there is nothing more motivating than a sheep staring you in the face.” Since our humble beginnings, I have been able to use what we have learned to help other individuals take a place of their own in Vermont’s sheep legacy. With a little knowledge and basic equipment, raising sheep is totally doable. I’ve included some basic Q&A on the opposing page.

While it is important to do your research and understand what you are getting into before you bring your new flock home, you need to recognize when it is time to put the notebook away, grab your shepherd’s crook, and go get sheep. As an older shepherd told me after I pelted him with questions for a full year, “Kim, quit asking questions and just go buy your sheep!” —*Kim Goodling*

SIX BASIC QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ANSWER BEFORE BRINGING YOUR FIRST FLOCK OF SHEEP HOME:

1. HOW MANY SHEEP SHOULD I PURCHASE?

Sheep need other sheep. I like to see at least three to five sheep when starting your first flock. The more sheep you have, the safer your flock will feel. The appropriate size of your flock will also depend upon how many acres of pasture you have available. In general, an acre should feed three to five sheep sufficiently, although it depends upon the quality of the pasture forage.

2. WHAT BREED OF SHEEP SHOULD I PURCHASE?

Each breed of sheep serves a different purpose. First, consider why you are getting sheep; this will help you narrow your search for the perfect breed. Do you want pets, wool sheep, or a dual-purpose sheep breed that provides both meat and wool? I always recommend visiting other sheep farms and attending festivals to meet different breeds in person and talk with their shepherds.



Kim Goodling and a new Gotland ewe lamb named Nina. Kim offers workshops and farmstays at Vermont Grand View Farm to help others learn about keeping sheep.

3. WHAT IS THE PREDATOR LOAD LIKE IN YOUR AREA? Sheep are a prey animal, and if you have a heavy predator burden, you may need to invest in a guard animal to live with your flock. Ask local farmers about their encounters with predators to help determine whether or not you need a livestock guardian. There are several different livestock guardians, from donkeys to llamas to livestock guard dogs. Each works a bit differently, and it is important to learn as much as you can about the guard animal before purchasing.

4. WHAT DO I FEED MY FLOCK?

Sheep are easy keepers. Turn them out on a lush pasture and they are happy. Have your pastures evaluated for quality of forage and begin pasture renovations if needed before you bring your flock home. In winter months, sheep eat second-cut hay rich in protein. Some shepherds supplement with grain, whereas others are grain-free. You need to be aware of the changing nutritional requirements throughout a sheep’s life span and provide extra feed when needed.

5. DO MY SHEEP NEED A SHELTER?

Sheep, in general, only need shelter during certain times of the year. They need shade from the sun, though this may be provided by a grove of trees. They need access to shelter during the winter months to get out of falling ice and snow; however, they still need access to the outdoors, even in snowy months. Lastly, depending upon the time of year you are lambing, sheep need shelter during lambing to protect the young from wind, subzero temperatures, and predators.

6. WHAT KIND OF FENCING DO I NEED?

Fencing keeps your sheep in and predators out. The ideal fence depends upon your terrain as well as your predator load. Consult with local farms and your local fence supply store when making fencing decisions. Several types of fencing are available, from portable electric fencing to sturdy woven wire fencing. If you are keeping your sheep behind an electric fence, the key is to have a high charge to ward off unwanted visitors.