

Baa, baa, business

Lostine woman raises rare sheep, runs multipurpose farm

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June Colony of Lostine has reached a milestone in creating a wool-producing sheep extraordinaire.

She's been breeding her sheep for 14 years and now she has what she thinks is the base of her own breed. This year she will select three of her best ewes and her best ram and register them as a breed of their own — the Colony Cross.

Her journey began when Colony bought out Jennifer Hobbs' herd. Hobbs, of Lostine, had come up with the idea of crossing Wensleydale sheep, known for their long, lustrous locks, with Targhee sheep, known for wool so soft it could be used for undergarments. The combination of the two breeds created a sheep with long, lustrous wool of astonishing softness.

Softness in wool is measured in microns (the measurement of the diameter of wool fibers) and the famous Merino sheep have a micron count of 10 to 20. The lower the better for micron count.

Wensleydale sheep, on the other hand, grow beautiful curly locks up to 12 inches long per year, but their micron count is 29 to 42 — a tough fiber ideal for carpets. But that sturdy Wensleydale wool has a strange quality. It doesn't have "kemp," a term used to describe short, rough strands of wool. It is those short strands that make wool itchy. So even though the micron count for Wensleydale wool is high compared to Merino, fine mohair garments contain Wensleydale wool to give them structure, durability and luster while still preserving the softness.

Colony's choice of crossbreeding was well planned. She was going for was the beauty and durability of the Wensleydale wool with the softness of Merino.

She chose the Targhee because it is the American version of the Merino, a breed which is most common in Australia. The Targhee was developed in Dubois, Idaho, following a similar crossbreeding program to what produced the Merino. Targhee is popular in Montana and Idaho, produces fine soft wool, packs a meaty body and is hardy.

The Wensleydale comes from the Dales region of Yorkshire, England, and is considered a rare breed.

Now, after 14 years of breeding, Colony has a herd of sheep that produces a wool with a micron count of 27 to 32.

"The wool of every one of my sheep has been tested," Colony said.

It's that careful and scientific approach that has defined Colony's every move as she developed her business.

She began by writing a grant in 2009 that would allow her to study the feasibility of raising wool sheep. At a time when the market for wool was in the basement, Colony wanted to see if she could create wool



Kathleen Elynn/Cheiffain

"All these girls will lamb in April," June Colony says. Colony has found a way to make small flock management a paying concern.

for another market altogether. "Since I got my original grant in 2009 I've learned a lot," Colony said.

And she never lost faith in herself. Early on she simply kept the fleeces of her early crossbreds, unwilling to sell for the low prices being offered. She now has 500 such fleeces in storage. This summer she plans to cash them in.

That's because part of her business plan was to diversify her operation and reduce waste. She purchased a cleaning mill and a felting machine. The cleaning mill, like a cotton gin, picks all the seeds and weeds from washed wool.

"It comes out of the machine like dandelion fluff," Colony said. "It's been all pulled apart."

That fluff is then fed into the pin-felting machine, where barbed needles push through the wool and pull back fibers, stitching the wool together into a 60-inch wide blanket.

This blanket can be used as batting inside quilts or to make hats, coats, wall hangings or rugs. The wool can be fed through the pin-felting machine several times to make it more and more durable.

But that's just part of Colony's diversification plans.

After bathing each of her

16 sheep, Colony shears them by hand, carefully separating the wool according to usage and value.

"Sometimes I leave the front cape of wool on the sheep," Colony said. "They look like a lion with a mane for a year. I shear it in the second year and I can get locks up to 24 inches long."

The long, lustrous locks sell for up to \$30 a pound online through eBay. Her customers, many of them spinners, are from all over the world. And once they've used her wool they come back for it again and again.

Those are her top sellers, along with shorter locks colored with natural dyes she creates from walnut shells, beets, barks and other products.

But that's not all she has done to diversify her operation.

Colony has begun analyzing the vitamin and mineral content of various feeds for her sheep.

She has discovered and now grows Northern Indian Flint Corn, a dried corn that is not only an excellent feed for her sheep, but also good for grinding into cornmeal or

polenta and making muffins.

"I am absolutely in love with the cornbread from the Saskatoon White," Colony said. "It's amazing. You will never eat any other kind of cornbread once you've eaten Saskatoon White."

The Flint Corn is a marketable product for Wallowa County, because there is no commercially grown GMO corn in the area.

Colony also began feeding her sheep root vegetables and that has helped the animals

produce more offspring. "I fed root crops to my animals in the fall last year, in addition to irrigated pasture. And the first seven ewes that lambed produced five sets of triplets," Colony said. "When you feed root products you go way beyond the vitamins and micro-nutrients of alfalfa, and still have a similar protein to alfalfa."

Furthermore, feeding root vegetables is more in line with what was historically fed to sheep.

So, Colony harvests her crops for human consumption, then turns her sheep out into her gardens where they dig for the roots and feed themselves on the gleanings.

But that's not the end of Colony's diversification plan.

The addition of the meaty Targhee bloodlines to her leaner Wensleydale creates a pretty good meat lamb.

A lamb will sell for about \$100 in October, which is off the main sale months of July and August.

"They're happy to see me at the auction by then," Colony said. "And it's after shearing. I'll get about \$100 for the lambswool fleece I'll shear before I sell the lambs at auction."

That's still not the end of Colony's diversification plan, but it's enough for now.

This summer she's finishing her machine shed and setting up her picker and pin-felter. She's also expanding her gardens. And she's picking out those top four sheep to try to register her own breed.

The list is already long for next year.

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