St. Croix Hair Sheep

St. Croix Hair Sheep Breeders, Inc.
Handbook
History of the St. Croix Sheep

Hair sheep from West Africa were introduced into the Caribbean in the 1500s. From this introduction, different breeds of sheep developed accounting for less than 2 million head throughout the Caribbean region. It is believed that they descended from the hair sheep of West Africa, but some feel it is a cross between the Wiltshire Horn and the native Criollo. The Virgin Island breed was introduced into the United States in the 1960s by Michael Piel of Maine. A second importation in 1975 was taken to Utah State University by Dr. Warren Foote. It is from these sheep that the St. Croix breed has been established in the United States. Small flocks were established in Florida, North Carolina, Ohio and California in addition to Utah for experimental purposes. Utah State University personnel found St. Croix to have attributes so interesting and useful they founded the registry and created the breed. It remains a closed breed, however there have been recent imports of some animals and semen from the Island of St. Croix.

Hair sheep comprise approximately ten percent of the world sheep population and are located primarily in the tropical regions of Africa, South America and the Caribbean. Caribbean hair sheep, such as the St. Croix, are prolific and breed throughout the year and thus are of interest to the U.S. sheep industry. Currently, the St. Croix is still a rare breed in the United States with approximately 5000 registered sheep in 1999 but is gaining in popularity.
St. Croix Characteristics

General Information
The St. Croix is an attractive all white sheep of moderate size and has a hair coat of consistent texture. They are gentle and easy to handle and both sexes are hornless. They are a true hair sheep and shed their winter coat of hair and fine downy fiber each spring and never need shearing. They have a slender hair covered tail that does not need to be docked. Mature rams sport a lion-like mane which may fall to the knees.

Adaptability
St. Croix Hair Sheep easily adapt to various climates. In cold weather they grow a thick winter coat which is then shed during warm weather. Their coat is hollow medullar hair which allows the sheep to shed water and thus they are able to tolerate heat and humidity as well as cold weather. They have superior inherent resistance to internal parasites, general good health and few hoof problems. Considered by many as ‘Parasitic Pasture Vacuums’ they help to eliminate parasites from pastures thereby reducing the need for frequent worming. (Zadjac – Virginia Tech, April 1999)

Size
The adult females weigh up to 150 pounds and the rams weigh up to 200 pounds. Lambs at birth weigh an average of 6-7 pounds.

Reproduction
Ewes and rams have early puberty and a long reproductive life. Ewes can have three lamb crops in two years with few birthing problems. St. Croix have a high multiple birth rate in the range of 50-75%. The lambing rate is 195-200%.

Carcass and Growth
Lambs finish without excessive fat and the carcass conformation is similar to that of a Rambouillet with the exception that the St. Croix has a higher slaughter yield due to smaller bone and fat. Meat yield is 23% more per carcass. The meat is naturally low in cholesterol with a mild flavor and aroma. The tanned hides have a near deer skin quality.

Temperament
St. Croix sheep are very tractable and easy to handle. They are active and vigorous, but show no tendency to be wild or flighty. The rams exhibit little tendency to butt or charge. The ewes are superb mothers. St. Croix are very comfortable around people and are easily managed in handling systems. They flock closely and are increasingly used to train herding dogs.
St. Croix Standard

General Appearance
The St. Croix is a hair sheep. It is of moderate frame size with a long muscle type/pattern and a well-sprung barrel. The coat is white and is shed each year.

Head
Both sexes are naturally polled with no visible scurs. They have an attractive profile with the males exhibiting a “Roman” nose. Ears should be fine textured neither upturned nor drooping, giving the appearance of alertness. The eyes are large and clear. The head should be carried in an upright manner on a long graceful neck.

Top Line
The neck should join smoothly to the shoulder. There may be a dip in the topline immediately after the wither; the back then continuing in a lengthy manner to the point of the hip at which the croup drops at a relatively acute angle to the tail head. This angle is believed to facilitate the ease of lambing common in this breed.

Body
The body should be symmetrical, deep and long when profiled from the side. St. Croix sheep are of moderate size and build when viewed from the front or back. The hips should be broad.

Legs
The forelegs should be straight with feet placed squarely underneath. The hind legs should not evidence “cow hocking” and the pasterns should be strong and upright.

Muscling
St. Croix have a moderate volume of muscle. Muscling should appear long and well tied-in at the joints. Heavier muscling should be encouraged but not at the expense of overall breed type.

Udder/Scrotum
Ewes should have well formed even udders with two good teats. Rams should have two large, even, well developed testicles.

Coat
The St. Croix is a white hair sheep. They should show evidence of a true shedding coat. However, a softer wool undercoat on younger animals should not be penalized. Rams should have a mane of long coarse hair extending from the back of the neck even reaching the knee at maturity. There may be a dark pigment around the eyes, nostrils and lips. Not more than ¼ of the ear at the tip should carry dark pigments.
St. Croix Standard

Disqualifications:
- Body spot larger than a U.S. quarter dollar
- Monorchid or cryptochid
- Horns or large visible scurs
- Evidence of shearing or body clipping

General Sheep Management

Gestation
The average gestation duration is 150 days.

Puberty
Both sexes of the St. Croix are precocious sexually. The males reach puberty as early as four months and the females breed to lamb at one year of age.

Reproductive Rate
Lambing rate varies from 150-200% with two lambings a year not uncommon.

Reproductive Lifespan
Ewes will remain productive for 8 to 10 years.

Breeding Season
The ewes have the ability to breed throughout most of the year in latitudes away from the equator and the ability to rebreed within a few weeks after lambing. A significant proportion of the St. Croix can produce two lamb crops in one year.

St. Croix are increasingly being used to cross breed to wool breeds. A study out of Dixon Springs Agricultural Center by the University of Illinois from 1985 to 1991 concluded that cross bred ewes bred to hair breed rams (St. Croix and Barbados Blackbelly were used) were superior for fertility, lamb survival, lamb weaning weight and ewe productivity.

Birth Weights
The average birth weights range from 6 to 7 pounds for twin births. Single birth lambs weigh slightly more.

Lambing
Lambing is generally easy with few complications.
Shearing
St. Croix are haired sheep and naturally shed their winter coats in the spring. For the small flock owner this trait is usually a net saving due to the shearing cost being more than the wool income.

Docking
Unlike wool sheep, tail docking is not required. If the tail is docked, the American Veterinary Medicine Association recommends that the “tail be docked at the level of the distal end of the caudal tail fold.”

Fencing
St. Croix respond well to electric fencing when it is used for managed intensive grazing. Two hot strands or electric netting is sufficient for interior fencing. The sheep also respond well to guardian dogs that live with them year round. Other predator control animals that work well include donkeys and Llama.

Feeding
St. Croix utilize coarse fodder more efficiently than other sheep. They are active grazers. Grass feeding is preferable to feed lot management as the latter only adds fat.

Parasite Management
In grazing studies conducted by scientists at the Agricultural Research Service at the USDA on contaminated pastures, St. Croix lambs have developed an almost complete resistance to certain parasites within In another study conducted by Gamble and Zajac for ARS and Virginia Tech, the scientists found that St. Croix “demonstrated high levels of acquired resistance to Haemonchus contortus under conditions of experimental or natural infection.” The APHIS (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service) of the USDA reported in 1999 that there had been no documented cases of Scrapie in St. Croix sheep. When grazing out on fresh, natural pasture they are more parasite resistant than wool sheep. Frequent, routine worming remains unnecessary with the St. Croix. Worming management varies from region to region around the country. New lambs should be wormed at approximately 2 months which should carry them until their own resistance builds at approximately 4-5 months of age. Worming should be conducted after fecal studies indicate the presence of worms. Because of the physical characteristics of St. Croix sheep it is easy to check the physical condition of the sheep to determine whether they have worms.

Cross Breeding
Cross breeding with St. Croix will produce higher parasite tolerance and resistance in other sheep. Cross breeding of St. Croix with wool sheep will produce a hair sheep within 3 generations.
St. Croix Uses

Meat Consumption
Members of the ethnic market have found the St. Croix provide a clean, fat-free carcass of mild firm meat available at all ages and at all times of the year due to their non-seasonal breeding habits. The moderate size of the St. Croix is ideal for use by any lamb/mutton lover and permits on-site slaughter for the individual for whom that is important as a ritual or family project. See your local St. Croix breeder for specific details.

Breeding
There has been an increased demand for St. Croix ewes to cross with white Dorper for commercial butcher lamb production.

Dog Training
The lively, but not wild, character of the St. Croix has made them ideal for training border collies for sheep dog trials.

Organic Weed Control
Utah State University has sent live sheep and embryos to Hawaii, the Philippines and the Far East for organic weed control in macadamia nut orchards.
St. Croix Registration

Registration Requirements
Any person who wishes to register or record St. Croix Hair Sheep with the Breeders, Inc. must be a member with the current year's dues paid in full. Animals which are the offspring of two St. Croix registered parents are eligible for registration.

Recordation Requirements
Sheep shall be eligible for registry if (1) they are descendents from registered St. Croix sire and dam, (2) can be traced in all of its lines of descent to the initial flock imported from the St. Croix U. S. Virgin Islands to Utah by the International Sheep and Goat Institute in 1975, and (3) or that are certified descendents of subsequent imports (including semen or embryo transfers) whose descendents are inspected and approved by the Association.

Physical Characteristics
Fiber – Hair that is shed annually and that is free from permanent wooly fiber.

Color – All white except pigment in the hooves; skin on lips, muzzle and around the eyes; and colored hair limited to not more than one fourth of the ear (tip).

Horns – Polled with the absence of scurs.

Soundness – Freedom from physical defects including mouth, back legs and feet, and udder or testicles and epidiymis.

Appearance – Must have a clean symmetrical appearance with moderately straight lines and appropriate muscling.

Identification – All sheep must be continuously identified by ear tag, tattoo, or other permanent ID.