

Mighty Merinos: Raising sheep is both business and pleasure for Whitefish hobby farmers

By LYNNETTE HINTZE/The Daily Inter Lake | Posted: Saturday, December 24, 2011 6:15 pm



Sheep farm

Diane Ward feeds Spencer, a late-season merino lamb, a bottle of milk at Round Prairie Farms outside Whitefish on Tuesday afternoon. Bags of processed merino wool rest against the fence of the sheep barn.

As the youngest lamb at Round Prairie Farm, Spencer gets ample doses of loving attention from Dick and Diane Ward.

"He's so sweet," Diane said, pampering him with an extra bottle of milk.

Spencer was born in September, several months later than her other spring lambs. And Diane knows she can't get too attached. In another couple of months Spencer will be trucked to Plains for use as a ram lamb for a couple just getting started in raising merino sheep.

The Wards have been raising merinos since shortly after they moved to their 20-acre farm west of Whitefish 6 1/2 years ago. They were lured to Whitefish by their daughter Jennifer Croskrey and her family, who live in the same neighborhood at Livermore Flats off U.S. 93.

Round Prairie Farm is a mixture of business and pleasure for the retired couple, and much more physically demanding than their careers were.

Dick was an industrial engineering professor at West Virginia University and the last 20 years of his career helped run the Material Handling Industry of America, a leading trade association for the material handling and logistics industry. Diane was a French teacher and school librarian, and headed an after-school program.

Now they're farmers and love the satisfaction of a day's work that includes feeding and caring for not only their herd of merinos but also their Kerry Bog ponies, Paso Fino horses and three dozen free-range chickens.

Diane had raised a few Katahdin sheep at their home in North Carolina to use for training her dogs to compete in national herding trials.

When the Wards moved to rural Whitefish, Diane sidelined her dog training to focus on raising sheep.

"I wanted sheep that gave me something," she said.

After researching several breeds, she homed in on merinos, prized for the fineness and softness of their wool.

"It's the finest wool for clothing," she said, noting that brands such as SmartWool use merino wool.

Merino wool can be worn close to the body because of its comfort factor and because it has antibacterial properties that make it odorless.

"This is why so many of the long underwear products are being made of merino wool," she said. "It naturally wicks moisture away from the body."

Though a number of sheep-breeding nations are believed to have played a part in the development of merino sheep, historians generally agree that the Moors, who dominated Spain from the eighth to the 13th century, were responsible for selectively breeding the animals into a superior line of sheep.

To buy their first merinos from Julie Robinson of Dubeau Farm in Kalispell, the Wards sold a collection of Hummel figurines they'd inherited and weren't sentimentally attached to. Diane continues to take her ewes to Dubeau Farm to be bred.

The lanolin-rich fleeces — merino fleeces are 40 percent lanolin — go to Custom Woolen Mill to Canada to be spun into wool. The sheep are professionally sheared once a year, generally at the end of February.

Round Prairie Farm has become a staple at the Whitefish Farmers Market in recent years, selling skeins of merino yarn and often toting a lamb as an attraction.

"I had 130 skeins out of this batch," Diane said, "and I only have 10 left."

Other sheep products include raw fleeces, rovings and handmade baby comforters made with organic cotton and merino wool.

Diane enters her fleeces in area fiber festivals and has won several awards.

She plans to learn how to spin wool and wants to continue experimenting with natural dyes such as rhubarb root, lupine and chestnuts.

"This is everything we hoped it would be and more," Diane said about their decision to raise merinos.

For more information about the Wards' merino products, go online to www.roundprairiefarm.com.

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