

Down-type Medium Wools

2022 Maryland Sheep & Wool Festival Fleece Show & Sale

Information Sheet

This year's MSWF Fleece Show & Sale will again include a class (Show & Sale) for Down-type fleeces. There is increasing interest in the Down-type wools among handspinners and other fiber artists. It is great to see that this long overlooked & under appreciated fiber is now being rediscovered by this market! We would like to continue to encourage this for the benefit of shepherds who have these breeds and fiber lovers who want to get their hands on their wool.

Background

Many of the breeders of sheep that produce this type of wool are primarily involved in production of lambs for meat and or/show, and have not found markets for their wool to be worth pursuing. Certainly this has been true on the commercial level where the wool has brought very low prices (less than \$.50 per pound). Many of these breeds have black, gray or red faces and legs, and the colored hair is considered a contaminant in most commercial wool processing. Their wool is often sheared before it has reached a sufficient staple length for processing, further reducing the commercial value and making it unattractive to handspinners. Now that spinners are learning about the qualities of Down-type wool, they are starting to seek it out and are finding it hard to source.

Down-Type Breeds

First Tier:

The true Down breeds found in the U.S. are: Southdown, Hampshire, Suffolk, Shropshire and Oxford (the other true Down breed, the Dorset Down, is not currently found in the U.S.).

Beyond the true Down breeds there are many other breeds may be categorized as Down-type breeds – either as a result of genetic ancestry or genetically unrelated but similar fiber traits. The tricky question is how widely to spread the net, and well-informed people might make different distinctions. Here are some initial guidelines based on consultation with a few very knowledgeable people:

Second Tier:

Dorset & Dorset Horn, Hog Island, Montadale, Polypay, Cheviot.

Third Tier:

California Red, Clun Forest, Columbia, Tunis, Gulf Coast Native, Texel, Kerry Hill, Santa Cruz. Though not white, one could also argue to include East Friesian and Black Welsh Mountain (on the coarser end of the spectrum).

Qualities “typical” of Down-type Wool*

Characteristics of Down-breed and Down-type wool fleeces include:

- Dense and relatively short (2-4 inches), blocky locks that may not pull apart cleanly
- Fiber diameter spans (and can exceed) medium range
- Springy, elastic, lofty and resilient
- Lots of crimp, but not as uniformly aligned as non-down medium wools, may be irregular along length of fiber, and a slightly disorganized look to the lock
- Low or no luster – “matte” finish
- Typically white – ranging from bright to buttery

Once processed, these wools maintain their resilient loftiness, are sturdy and hard wearing and can be resistant to felting to the extent that some can be machine washed without harm.

Note that in the U.S. some of these breeds have been crossed in an effort to highlight other characteristics and this may have led to the wool “straying” from the Down-type characteristics.

Down-type Medium Wool at the Festival

The characteristics of the Down-type wools are sufficiently different from the other medium wools that we believe they deserve their own category, as they are frequently dismissed when judged against other medium wools such as Corriedale or Finnsheep (and many others). In their own Show & Sale class, they will be judged against others of their type as well as being easier for interested buyers to find.

If you wish to enter some fleeces in the MSWF Fleece Show & Sale, here are some guiding principles for you:

- 1) Optimal length: 2 ½ to 3 ½ inches. Absolute minimum of two inches. Staple length in the optimal range are likely to support higher prices.
- 2) Fleeces should be well skirted: short & poor fibers (belly wool, top knots) removed; colored hair (from face & legs) should be removed as much as possible; second cuts, manure tags, and any contaminants should be removed (vegetable matter such as hay, straw, burrs or other seed heads, etc.; colors from marking crayons, poly twine, hoof trimmings, feathers, etc.).
- 3) Fleece qualities should be as uniform as possible across the whole fleece.
- 4) Fleeces should be presented with the cut or skin-side on the outside (folded and rolled is the normal practice)
- 5) Fleeces do not have to be from pure-bred sheep – crosses are welcome.
- 6) You decide whether your fleece(s) are better suited to the traditional Medium Wool (Class B) class, or the Down-Type Medium Wool (Class B1) class. Since some genetic lines may have incorporated other fleece types, they may not demonstrate Down-type characteristics. This is up to you.
- 7) In pricing your fleeces remember that buyers may be interested in trying something new but wary of spending a lot without being familiar with Down-type wool. In previous years, prices for Down-type breeds have ranged from \$3-\$7/lb. Most of them have sold. The ones that have not sold have been too short or carried too much VM.

* For more details, see Robson & Ekarius “The Fleece & Fiber Sourcebook”