Not all sheep are the same, there are many different breeds of sheep that are suited for a range of environments and purposes.

More than 70% of the sheep in Australia are pure-bred Merinos, with other breeds and cross-breds making up the remainder.

Wool produced from Merino sheep is finer than wool produced from other breeds.

**Lambs**

Not all sheep are used to produce high-quality wool. Some breeds are used specifically for meat, others for milk and some breeds are used to produce both wool and meat — dual-purpose breeds.

Common dual-purpose breeds used in Australia include: Border Leicester, Poll Dorset, Corriedale, Coopworth, Texel and South African Meat Merino (SAMM).

Breeds that tend to be used mostly for meat production include: Suffolk, White Suffolk and Dorper.

A breed that is used specifically for milk production is the East Friesland. This breed is known for its fertility — the ability to produce lots of twins and triplets and plenty of milk to raise multiple lambs.

**Did you know?**

- Although the Merino is renowned for producing high-quality wool, it also can produce lots of meat, so it is known as a dual-purpose breed.

**Fast facts**

- Different breeds of sheep are used for different purposes, such as wool, meat or milk production.

- More than 70% of the sheep in Australia are Merinos — bred specifically for their high-quality wool fibre.

- Sheep producers often crossbreed to produce dual-purpose animals.

- Crossbreeds take on the qualities of both their parents, but to a lesser degree than either original parent.
Crossbreeding

Sheep producers sometimes mate a ram from one breed with a ewe from another breed to produce a crossbred lamb. Crossbreeding produces animals that have the qualities of both parents.

A common crossbreed is a **first-cross**, which is produced by mating a Merino ewe with a Border Leicester ram.

Border Leicester sheep have been developed to produce more meat than a Merino and still produce quality wool. The first-cross lamb will produce both high-quality wool and meat (although it will not produce wool as fine as a pure-bred Merino).

First-cross ewes are often joined with a meat breed, such as a Poll Dorset, or another Border Leicester to produce a **second-cross** lamb specifically for meat production.

**Glossary**

**Crossbreed** — an animal that has been bred by mating two animals of different breeds.

**Dual-purpose** — a breed of sheep that is used for both wool and meat production.

**First-cross** — a cross produced by joining a Merino ewe with a Border Leicester ram. This animal produces lots of medium-quality wool and meat.

**Second-cross** — a cross produced by joining a first-cross ewe with a meat ram to produce a lamb that is used for meat.

**Origins of the Merino**

The Australian Merino was originally bred from the Spanish Merino, brought out to Australia during 1797 from Cape Town, South Africa.

After generations of breeding, the Australian Merino is now a breed in its own right and has been developed specifically for wool production in Australia’s hot, dry environment.

There are four main types of Australian Merino — superfine, fine, medium and strong. Each type has been developed to suit a particular type of environment across Australia.

Regardless of type, modern Merinos have been bred to produce a large amount of high-quality wool.

A fully-grown Merino ram in a high-rainfall area can produce about 4-10 kilograms of wool each year — this is enough wool to produce five average men’s business suits.

**Top shelf:** about 90% of the world’s fine apparel wool is produced in Australia.

**More information**

For more information about sheep breeds and breeding, go to:

- Beyond the Bale: beyondthebale.wool.com
- The Workboot Series: The Story of Wool
- www.wool.com
- AWI Wool Production YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/AWIWoolProduction
- The USB that came with the **LEARN ABOUT WOOL** kit.