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

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

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

Breeds and their uses

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, 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.

Common sheep breeds in Australia

Merino (wool and meat)
Border Leicester (wool and meat)
Corriedale (wool and meat)
Suffolk (meat)

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.

• Crossbreds 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 an ewe from another breed to produce a **crossbred** lamb.

Crossbreeding produces animals that have the qualities of both parents.

A common **crossbred** 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 specifically for meat production.

**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 Merino:

- **Superfine** — These Merinos are used for the highest quality wool and have very fine wool fibers.
- **Fine** — These Merinos are used for high-quality wool and have fine wool fibers.
- **Medium** — These Merinos are used for medium-quality wool and have medium wool fibers.
- **Strong** — These Merinos are used for low-quality wool and have coarse wool fibers.

Each type of Merino 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.

**More information**

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

- www.learnaboutwool.com
- beyondthebale.wool.com
- wool.com/breeding
- makingmorefromsheep.com.au
- Download the free ‘Sheep Breed Compendium by AWEX’ smartphone application

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