

Sheep breeds

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.



Merino: Merino sheep are renowned for their ability produce lots of high-quality wool.

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.



Merino (wool and meat)



Border Leicester (wool and meat)



Corriedale (wool and meat)



Suffolk (meat)

Common sheep breeds in Australia

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



First-cross benefits: A first-cross lamb is produced when a ram from one breed, such as Border Leicester is mated with a ewe of another breed, such as a Merino. The first-cross lamb still produces lots of wool, but produces more meat than a pure-bred Merino lamb.

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

Crossbred — 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.



Dual-purpose cross: Crossbreeding produces animals that can produce both medium-quality wool and lots of 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:

- www.learnaboutwool.com
- Beyond the Bale: beyondthebale.wool.com
- wool.com/breeding
- makingmorefromsheep.com.au
- Download the free 'Sheep Breed Compendium by AWEX' smartphone application

