**SHEEP BREEDS**

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

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.

**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.

**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.

**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 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. 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.

**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.

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

**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.

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

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**More information**

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

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