A Different Look from Across the Ocean

OPP Discussion Warms Up

Romanov Facts and Myths

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Romanov Crossbreeding: What About the Wool?
Romanov Facts and Myths

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It has already been four years since I wrote my article on the Romanov sheep published in the October 1986 issue of The Shepherd. Since then the Romanov sheep have done what I expected them to do, invade the U.S.A. I wrote the enclosed article because I got many calls and letters mainly from U.S.A. from breeders who probably didn’t read the 1986 article or who had other questions not addressed in that article. It also came to my attention that some breeders started making some claims which may not be true.

I haven’t found yet a breeder who is not satisfied and wished he never acquired Romanovs. However, I receive numerous calls and letters from breeders who have questions I either never addressed in my articles on the breed, or if I had actually addressed, I was not clear enough. I thought that the best way to deal with that is to write the most frequent questions I was asked and my answers to these questions. I hope this will clarify some of the facts and myths about this remarkable breed.

Q: How many animals did Canada import and from where?
A: We imported 16 ewes and 7 rams from France, only 14 ewes and 3 rams passed the quarantine. Shortly after we lost 2 ewes and 1 ram. So, all the progeny in North America came from 12 ewes and 4 rams.

Q: What are those color codes: red, green, orange and white?
A: We also had blue, but we discontinued that color and added the few blue animals to the white line. The color was an artificial mean to help us avoid or let’s say delay inbreeding as much as possible. We divided the ewes into 4 groups of 3 ewes, each with a ram. We gave them a colored tag. The original rams and ewes of the same color were always mated together.

Since we could not mate the progeny with their father or sisters to their brothers, we took rams from, say green family, to mate females in say, orange family, and rams from orange family to mate ewes in white family etc. All the progeny of the first generation took the color of their mother family (but they were actually a mixture of two colors). In the following generation we repeated the same story, this time we actually mixed 3 colors. Ewes which were coded orange but were actually green X orange were mated to rams which were white, although the progeny remained orange coded, they had the blood of the original 3 rams, orange, green, and white. After the fourth generation all the animals were thoroughly mixed so that the color had no significant meaning.

Q: Are there differences in performance, size, temperament between families of different colors?
A: Definitely no, as shown from the previous question, most of the animals sold were a mixture of the 4 colors (families if you prefer this notation).

Q: What are the strong points of the Romanov?
A: Prolificacy is definitely the strongest point. Flocks averaging between 3.0 and 3.5 lambs are not uncommon. Actually in the Clay Centre flock the mature ewes averaged 3.5 lambs born and 2.9 lambs weaned in 1988; the results in 1989 were even better, 4.1 lambs born and 3.6 lambs weaned. Most of the litters are triplets and quads, larger litters are not rare and also are not that frequent. In Clay Centre they got 7 sets of quintuplets and 1 sextuplets. We, at Lennoxville, never got sextuplets but a few quintuplets. I would not be surprised, though, if some Canadian or American breeders have sextuplets.

Romanovs also have breeding seasons longer than most domestic breeds. In Canada, we subjected our herd to a system of 3 lambings in 2 years without use of artificial means of inducing estrus. Fertility was high in fall and winter matings but was about 50% in late spring-summer mating. Prolificacy was also lower following summer mating.

The third strong point of the Romanov is their remarkable precocity. Ewe lambs should be separated before 70 days of age or risk being mated by their male litters-mates. We had that experience at Lennoxville, of 20 lambs left with their male sibs up to 90 days, 11 lambed at 8 months producing 16 lambs.
Q: What are the weak points?
A: The wool of the Romanov is a mixture of hairy undercoat usually black in color and a fine, white undercoat; this combination gives the gray color of the Romanov and is also a headache for the manufacturing. I was told by many Romanov breeders that they are making good money selling their fleeces to handspinners and that they are developing a special market for this type of fleeces.

The other weak point may be the carcase conformation of Romanov lambs sent to market. These carcasses, though generally acceptable, cannot compete with mutton-type sheep such as Suffolks, Hampshire, Oxford, Dorsets, etc. Our observation is that the front part is usually heavier than in other breeds and the legs are less developed.

Q: Is it possible that Romanov lambs outgrow Suffolk lambs?
A: Some particular Romanov lambs may grow faster than some particular Suffolk lambs. That does not mean that Romanov lambs outgrow Suffolks. I know of some Romanov lambs gaining about 1 lb. per day on Record of Performance tests; I also know of some barely making 3/4 lb. per day. On average, Romanov lambs gained about 0.6 lb. compared to .58 lb. for Suffolk last year in Canada.

Q: Is there a line of Romanov larger than Suffolks?
A: There is a great variation between animals, some ewes and rams may be as big or bigger than average Suffolks. Concentrating the blood of these large animals together may produce a large line in the future, but it is too early to conclude that such a line has already been developed in that short time, people sometimes exaggerate. Also remember that Romanov is a maternal breed and large animals are not advantageous, they cost more to keep and tend giving similar production.

Q: How do Romanov crosses compare to crosses of other breeds?
A: It is too early to give definite conclusions, this can only be done after comparisons are made. However, from my observations and the work I have been doing with Romanov vs. Finn sheep and Booroola crosses and the comparisons made at Lethbridge Research Station, it seems that Romanov crosses have lots to offer. Also, I have been impressed by the overwhelming positive results I have received from Romanov breeders involved in crossbreeding.

Q: Can we expect more important in the future?
A: Many breeders are trying, but it is difficult for the following reasons:
A) Animals should come by boat, so we need a big shipment and without the cost of the boat and opening of the quarantine.
B) Minimum 5 years of quarantine before any of these animals can be released.

Q: Can we import semen or embryos?
A: As far as I know, semen is not allowed, embryos from certain countries are allowed but these countries do not have Romanovs.

Q: If importing new blood is not possible, will continuous inbreeding harm the performance of the Romanov?
A: Remember that inbreeding is harmful only when the animals are carriers of undesirable genes. So far, very few breeders reported animals with abnormalities which makes me believe that we were lucky with the animals we got from France. However, it takes new blood to keep the Romanov flock healthy and productive in the future.

Q: Can we expect future sales of Romanov from Agriculture Canada?
A: Very unlikely, since the flock at La Pocatiere perished in a fire; it is possible, however, that the Lethbridge Station puts some of its surplus sheep for sale in the future.

Q: From where can I get a list of Romanov breeders in North America?
A: The Canadian Sheep Breeders' Association publishes a registry with the names of all registered sheep breeders. The Romanov breeders are included in this registry. You can get a copy for $2 by writing to the secretary, Mrs. Malowitch at P.O. Box 260, Borden, Saskatchewan, SOK ONO, or phone (306) 997-4881.

Q: Where are these Romanov breeders located?
A: The numbers of Romanov breeders registered by Province or State are:

Canada
Albertia 4
British Columbia 3
Manitoba 3
New Brunswick 2
Nova Scotia 1
Ontario 19
Quebec 37
Saskatchewan 2

USA
Ohio 2
New York 1
North Dakota 2
Iowa 1
Montana 1
Illinois 1
South Carolina 1
Minnesota 2
Pennsylvania 1
Nebraska 1

Q: Are there any other countries interested in importing Romanovs from Canada and United States?
A: As far as I know Romanovs were exported to Cuba, Mexico, many countries in South America and Japan made some contacts to import Romanovs from Canada. The list is growing.

Q: Where can we get documentation or more information on the Romanov?
A: By writing or phoning the author at P.O. Box 90, Lennoxville, Quebec, J1M 1Z3, CANADA, Tel: (819) 565-9171.

These were my answers to your most frequently asked questions. If you have any others I'll always be glad to answer them.