

Although it is the last of October, it seems a little like New Year's week to us. This is the feeling we get every year about this time, because it really is the beginning of a new year for us. On last Tuesday we turned the rams in with the ewes again. This starts the breeding season that will result in the 2017 lamb crop that will arrive in late March and early April.

We will have lambs a bit earlier than last year--April has been our traditional lambing season for decades, with a few early arrivals in March. This year, we will have the bulk of the births about the time that the first lambs have been born in previous years. We will see how this works for us. It would be nice to have the flock well started and on grass before the gardening season becomes too intense. But, whenever we lamb, we know that it will involve three weeks, at least, of sleep deprivation and lots of manual labor. It is also, though, three weeks of highly interesting work. After all these years, it is still exciting to find that first lamb of the season, and nice twins still bring us that good feeling, even when the barn is full of ewes with their babies.

Before we sent the rams into the sheep pastures to do the only job that is required of them, we gave the ewes a dose of worm medicine and sorted out the replacement ewe lambs we saved from the 2016 crop. We won't let them be bred. They are in a pasture by themselves, enjoying a few weeks of independence from the flock in which they grew up.

A few weeks ago, it became apparent that the ewes were looking for the buck sheep. For most of the year, they pretty much ignore each other. But when the fall days shorten and the weather turns cool, they renew their interest in each other.

First, the rams--or bucks, as we call them--begin to take notice when the ewes are close by. They stand by the fence and dream, I guess. Then, we start to see individual ewes that aren't in any hurry to follow their comrades to the far reaches of the paddocks. Instead, they stand and look longingly at the bucks across two or three fences.

So, when we finally move the rams to the ewe paddocks, they waste no time before they begin checking out the heat status of the females. And usually, about five days short of the accepted five month

gestation period, we will go to the barn one day and find the first ewe with her newborn lamb.

Most of the year, though, the sheep are outside. Two to three weeks before the lambing season is to begin, we move the sheep from the snowy fields where they spend the winter to the hay barn/lambing facility. By this time, enough hay has been fed to the sheep and the cattle to make room for the ewes. Runo moves the lambing gates and feeders back into the barn, and we divide the ewes into pens of ten to twelve. As soon as they are dry--in case they were wet with snow or rain when they came in--we begin to shear. While we shear, we notice growing udders that indicate to us that lambing is near.

So, ten months into the year 2016, we have no time to look back and reflect on the past months. Instead, we are focusing on 2017 and the lamb crop that will take much of our attention.