When is the best time to lamb or kid?

One of the most important decisions a sheep or goat producer must make is "when do I lamb or kid?" There are no best times. It varies by farm/ranch. There are pros and cons to different times, seasons, and frequencies. Farm resources, animal genetics, and market demand all factor into this important decision.





Winter (early)

Winter lambing/kidding is common and offers many advantages. High on the list is the availability of labor. Another big advantage is marketing. Historically prices are highest in the first half of the year (e.g., Easter). Lambs /kids born in the winter usually do well and are typically weaned early, creep-fed, and finished on concentrate diets. However, more elaborate (expensive) housing is usually needed for winter (or early spring) lambing/kidding, and feed costs can be significantly higher.

Spring (late)

Spring is the most natural time to lamb/kid and offers many advantages over winter. The production cycle is usually synchronized with forage growth, allowing for maximum use of forages and less purchased feed. Ewes/does usually give birth to larger litters because breeding is at the most natural time (fall). Pasture lambing/kidding is more viable option, reducing labor. Lambs/kids usually stay with their dams for pasture-rearing. Some of the challenges with spring lambing/kidding include weather, worms, predators, and potentially lower market prices.





Fall (out-of-season)

Fall might be the best time to lamb/kid were it not for the seasonality of reproduction in sheep/goats. Weather conditions are usually ideal. The risk of predation and internal parasitism is significantly less than spring. Cool season forages experience their second flush of growth. Lambs/kids can be sold towards the end of the year when prices are traditionally higher. Unfortunately, not all sheep/goats will breed in the spring. Conception rates are lower, and females usually give birth to fewer offspring. At the same time, there are several options for inducing estrus in non-cycling females if you don't have the right genetics.

Accelerated

Accelerated is when ewes/does give birth more frequently than once a year. Twice a year is possible, but 3 times in 2 years is more practical (e.g., January, May, and September). With Cornell University's STAR© system, ewes produce 5 lamb crops in 3 years. The seasonality of reproduction comes into play with accelerated birthing in terms of both reduced conception rates and smaller litter sizes. Accelerated lambing is more labor intensive, requires excellent nutrition, and superior management, but lambs/kids are available year-round for marketing, fixed costs are reduced, and profit potential is significantly higher. Farms with large capital investments usually go this route.



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