

Heritage Sheep Breed FIBER PROFILE



Oxford

The Oxford, or Oxford Down, is one of the six classic Down breeds of sheep,* which originated in southern England during the 19th century. The Oxford was developed during the 1830s, through crossing Cotswold rams (a longwool breed) on Hampshire ewes, with possibly some Southdown contribution as well (both ewe types are Down breeds).

Oxfords, being large sheep, grow abundant fleeces. You could outfit yourself head-to-toe for winter with a single year's growth from one animal. As a plus, the wool is highly unlikely to felt, so textiles should be machine washable and dryable without any commercial shrink-preventing treatment.



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The challenge in using Oxford wool is getting a good supply in decent shape. The white wool may contain dark fibers from the face and legs, so it is of minimal commercial value. Shepherds don't tend to think of it as being worth careful tending and a fleece may contain a lot of vegetable matter.

Combing removes this better than carding; if you want to card, you can comb first to clean it.

Versatile, bouncy, and durable, Oxford wool is worth seeking out for sweaters, mittens, hats, blankets, and other fabrics intended for everyday use. Fiber folk would enjoy having mill-spun yarns.

* Dorset Down, Hampshire, Oxford, Shropshire, Southdown, and Suffolk. Of these, all but Dorset Down exist in North America, and all but Hampshire and Suffolk are rare breeds.

Fleece weight	At one time Oxford fleeces were almost twice as large as today. Current weights run from 6½–12 pounds (3–5.5 kg); yield 50–60 percent.
Staple length	Usually 3–5 inches (7.5–12.5 cm); may reach 6–7 inches (15–18 cm).
Fiber diameters	25–37 microns, though described most often as 28–34 microns.
Lock characteristics	Dense, resilient, medium-grade wool; blocky, rectangular staples hold together and may be hard to distinguish from each other.
Natural colors	White. There may be a few black fibers, because the Down breeds have colored faces and legs. Large flocks will favor white wool. In small flocks, colored strains may exist or emerge.



lock photos reproduced to the same scale



lower photos © Deborah Robson