

Babes & Tots Challenge - Breed Recommendations

The breeds table on the following page gives an idea of the “quality” and “softness” you can expect from each breed, but keep in mind that these may vary widely between flocks and between individual sheep. Wool tends to become less soft as the animal ages.

Things to keep in mind:

- For baby garments that will come in contact with the skin, look for the softest wool
- Shetland is a special case, with fleece grades ranging from “superfine premium” to “rough.” Make sure you are getting the fine end of the spectrum. You can find the grading definitions at the Fine Fleece Shetland Sheep Association web site here: <https://www.finefleeceshetlandsheep.org/wool-grading-chart>
- For easy care garments that resist felting, choose down breeds (Southdown, Oxford, Shropshire). Some Hog Island, Jacob, Dorset Horn, and Clun Forest also resist felting. Always test your wool (knit a swatch and try to felt it, or try to felt a handful of loose fiber) to be sure it won’t felt.
- For garments that are durable, especially for active toddlers, look for the “versatile” or “versatile-sturdy” wools.
- Some of the breeds (Shetland & Soay) designated as “possible” or “probable double coat,” may have a soft undercoat. If you are spinning the wool into yarn or felting it, you can separate the fiber in the locks and use just the softest. If you are purchasing yarn from these breeds, it has probably been spun with both types of fiber combined, so is likely to be warm but scratchy.
- Probably best to avoid the Longwools (Teeswater, Cotswold, Leicester Longwool, Lincoln), because of their tendency to felt and because they’re not as soft as other breeds. But, a lamb’s fleece could be the exception if easy care (i.e., resistance to felting) is not an issue.
- Hair sheep are best avoided (Barbados Blackbelly & St. Croix). Wiltshire Horn could be the exception. My experience was that there were very few hairs (easily removed) and the remaining wool was quite soft; however, it does felt very readily.

My favorites

- **For easy care and durability:** Down breeds and Clun Forest. They are easy to work with (lots of crimp in good medium wools), soft enough to wear against the skin, resist felting, and wear well.
- **For fine baby gifts:** Fine Shetland and CVM. The softest of fibers, perfect for warm lacy baby shawls and blankets, so long as the parents know not to throw them in the washing machine!

U.S. Heritage Breeds - From The Livestock Conservancy's Conservation Priority List

Breed	Status	Type	Crimp	Quality (soft, sturdy, variable, ...)	Softness (1-soft to 5-sturdy)
Shetland	Recovering	Possible double coat	low-high	soft & versatile & sturdy!	1 (fine or under coat) to 5 (sturdy or outer coat)
Soay (British)	Threatened	Probable double coat	low-high	soft & versatile & sturdy!	1 (fine or under coat) to 5 (sturdy or outer coat)
Karakul, American	Threatened	Double coat	low	soft/sturdy	1 (under coat)/ 5 (outer coat)
Navajo-Churro	Critical	Usually double coated, some finer & coarser single coats	low	soft/sturdy	1 (under coat/finer fleece) to 5 (outer coat/coarser fleece)
Romeldale/CVM	Threatened		high	soft	1
Jacob, American	Threatened		medium	versatile	3
Tunis, American	Watch		medium	versatile	3
Clun Forest	Threatened		medium-high	versatile-sturdy	3
Black Welsh Mountain	Threatened		medium	versatile-sturdy	3.5
Dorset Horn	Threatened		medium	versatile-sturdy	4
Southdown	Recovering	Down	high	versatile	3
Oxford	Watch	Down	high	versatile-sturdy	4
Shropshire	Watch	Down	high	versatile-sturdy	4
Santa Cruz	Critical	Feral	high	versatile (may be soft)	2.5
Florida Cracker	Critical	Feral	high	versatile	3
Gulf Coast or Gulf Coast Native	Critical	Feral	high	versatile	3
Hog Island	Critical	Feral	medium	sturdy	5
Teeswater	Critical	Longwool	low	sturdy	5
Cotswold	Threatened	Longwool	low	sturdy	5
Leicester Longwool	Threatened	Longwool	low	sturdy	5
Lincoln	Threatened	Longwool	low	sturdy	5
Barbados Blackbelly	Watch	Hair			
St. Croix	Watch	Hair			
Wiltshire Horn	Watch	Hair			?

Statuses	
Critical	Breeds with fewer than 200 annual registrations in the US and an estimated global population of less than 500.
Threatened	Breeds with fewer than 1,000 annual registrations in the US and an estimated global population of less than 5,000
Watch	Breeds that present genetic or numerical concerns or have a limited geographic distribution, with fewer than 2,500 annual registrations in the US, and an estimated global population less than 10,000.
Recovering	Breeds once listed in another category, but have exceeded Watch category numbers and still need monitoring.