

# Outdoor lambing viable in Mayo

We talked to two part time sheep farmers, who are lambing outdoors and achieving good results. Low costs of entry to the system make it attractive. Attention to detail and adequate infrastructure and shelter are the keys to success

## Liam Quinn

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Liam Quinn, John Noonan and John Davitt.

<b>Name</b>	John Davitt.
<b>Location</b>	Castlebar, Co Mayo.
<b>Farm Size</b>	26ha.
<b>Soil Type</b>	Free draining/ peat.
<b>System</b>	Mid-season.
<b>Lambing Date</b>	Starts 17 March.

## John Davitt

Originally a suckler farmer, John felt the system was unsustainable and a major investment in infrastructure was needed, which would mean years of debt. He chose to start sheep farming with an emphasis on low management and good output.

## System

John works full time off-farm and now keeps a flock of 110 mixed-cross ewes. Easy-care sheep play an increasingly important role in John's system.

"The breed sheds its wool naturally, so there's no shearing needed," he says.

"Paddocks are closed from early October. Lambing starts around the

17 March, when we are sure to have grass on the farm."

Although fertiliser input is low at one bag/ac on the grazing ground, a low stocking rate has resulted in John being faced with excess grass during the summer months. As a participant in the current GLAS environmental scheme, John emphasizes the benefit of not topping until the 15 July.

"It works well in regenerating seeds. I am not a big lover of perennial rye grass, but multispecies swards are an area I will be looking into in the future," says John.

"Come November or December, the fields will be grazed. Any white butt will be eaten, leaving good grass for freshly lambed ewes in the spring."

From December, the sheep are supplemented with silage and mineral buckets. John believes that the sheep grazing outdoors have contributed to an increase in soil organic matter, through better recycling of nutrients.

Ewes are fed concentrates for six weeks pre-lambing. All lambing takes place outdoors.

"I don't feed meal after lambing

because this tends to cause mis-mothering," John says. This highlights the simplicity of the system.

"A small lean-to shed is used to look after twin-bearing ewes when weather is poor, but most sheep don't see the shed."

The flock has a 20% replacement rate. All replacements are bought from one source, for bio-security reasons. Cull ewes are sold at the local mart and John has implemented a strict culling policy that works in line with good record keeping at lambing.

## Lambs

Drafting of lambs begins from mid-July, with the aim of getting lambs finished off grass as quickly as possible. This is achieved by dosing lambs every six weeks with Cobalt B12 and regular treatment for worms. Ewes and their lambs are moved through paddocks every five to six days, helping to maintain good thrive in the lambs. The aim is to graze each paddock for three days every three weeks, following Teagasc research in Athenry. Ewes are treated for worms

just after lambing to help combat spring rise.

John is a member of the Mayo-Blackface producer group, selling 150-160 lambs through the group each year. Ram lambs are separated from the ewe lambs in August and grazed separately. Lambs are condition scored and weighed regularly throughout the summer and then drafted accordingly.

The drafting results of Johns lambs are impressive, with 30% of the lambs sold by September 1 and 70% of the lambs sold by September 30, with an average carcase weight of 20.56kg. Conformation was 78% U grade and 22% R grade.

### Infrastructure

Small paddocks, good fencing and sheep penning are needed to manage the flock. Ewes are meal trained for ease of management. There is a high level of shelter available from the hedgerows and trees that border the paddocks. John intends to increase his use of hedgerows to divide paddocks in the future.

Soil fertility is also closely monitored on the farm.

"Although fertiliser input is low, we regularly apply lime," John says.

This is important in keeping nutrients readily available to the grazing sheep. John directs most of his fertiliser to the silage fields. The aim is to have these fields at optimum index for phosphorus and potassium to get good quality silage in a six week growing period.

<b>Name</b>	Tom Gill.
<b>Location</b>	Westport, Co Mayo.
<b>Farm Size</b>	23ha.
<b>Soil Type</b>	Heavy/poor draining.
<b>System</b>	Mid-season.
<b>Lambing Date</b>	Start 9 April.

### Tom Gill

Tom is a carpenter by trade and operates a part-time sheep enterprise. Like John Davitt, he got out of sucklers. "The ground was just unsuitable for heavy cows," he says.

### System

Tom says his sheep mainly consist of Cheviot crosses.

"I cross the Cheviots with a Blue Leicester ram for improved prolificacy and milk, who are then crossed with Texel rams. These crosses give me the type of lamb I want."

Lambing starts on the 9 April.

"On this farm, we lamb for grass. I usually get fertiliser out with the quad around the 17 of March, so I can be sure of grass by April," says Tom. He also notes that "grass ate in February on this farm can be very



Tom Gill and Liam Quinn.

slow to come again given the nature of the soil."

"I scan the ewes in the second week of February and separate ewes carrying singles and twins and feed based on this."

Last year, Tom was happy with his outcome: four sets of triplet lambs and a 50:50 ratio of single and twin lambs.

Paddocks around the house are closed early in the year, as this is where ewes are brought to lamb in April. All lambing takes place outdoors and management is important at this time.

"It's rare you would have losses at that time of year," Tom says, whose mortality rate is low at 9-10%. Regarding lambing difficulty, Tom notes that "big single lambs not noticed in time can be troublesome."

"Sheep are checked in the morning and at night-time only during lambing. As ewe's lamb, the ewes that have singles are kept in separate groups to ewes with twins."

Emphasis is on having good grass for freshly lambed ewes and so there is no feeding of concentrates after lambing.

"Any ewes that cause problems are tagged with a red tag as soon as they cause the problem," says Tom.

"Ewes are dosed just after lambing and lambs are dosed at six weeks. From then on faecal sampling is done on the farm."

### Lambs

Tom gets one, if not two, drafts of lambs straight off the ewes, as these are the most profitable stock sold annually. Drafting begins from the end of August. Lambs are fed concentrates from mid-September when grass quality deteriorates.

Tom is currently in the process of converting a cattle-slatted shed for finishing lambs using timber slats. With over 70% of lambs sold finished by end of November, Tom expects to have the final 54 lambs fit for slaughter early in the New Year.

Tom has a lambing rate of 1.4 lambs per ewe weaned, all of which are killed through the Mayo Blackface Producer Group, selling on average 150 lambs per year and targeting a carcase weight of 20kg.

### Infrastructure

When asked about labour management Tom says that he wants "to be making things easier not harder."

"Shelter and grass are two things you must have for this type of system. The quad and trailer are used at lambing time, but are also very important given the land type."

Tom places great emphasis on having good penning and fencing for lambing outdoors. He describes how having rams meal-trained is very important in maintaining condition during the breeding season.

"A good dog also plays an important role in labour management," he says.

As a regular competitor in international dog trials Tom has a wealth of experience in training sheep dogs.

### Lambing Outdoors Summary

- Low capital cost to set up.
- Lower labour requirement.
- Need for good shelter/dry shed if weather is poor, otherwise there's a risk of big losses of young lambs.
- Good infrastructure necessary - paddocks /penning.
- High level of management needed for certain periods.
- Good quality silage essential to reduce meal feeding.