

Female Sheep Shearers Find Inspiration in Hard Work and Tradition

BY TIM KING

Sheep shearing is largely men's work in some parts of the country. That's not so in Maine. Arla Casselman, who farms MOFGA-certified organic blueberries near Warren, believes that's due in part to MOFGA.

"With the MOFGA apprenticeship program I feel like it's easy as a female to get on a farm," she says. "A lot of the smaller farms that I know of rely on apprentices and it's pretty normal to find an all-female crew. Because of that it's easier for women to get into agriculture. I don't know any other state that has something like MOFGA."

What's true about farming in general is true about shearing sheep, says Casselman, who has been growing blueberries for nine years and shearing sheep for five. It's certainly true for her.

When Casselman and her husband enrolled in MOFGA's journeyman program, they had planned to be floriculturists and mentored with a flower farmer. About six years ago, while Casselman was enrolled in the program, a friend invited her to help on shearing day. As a child, Casselman had loved the sheep on her uncle's Pennsylvania farm so she gladly accepted.

"The shearer there was Gwen Hinman from New Hampshire. When I saw her shearing, I thought that this was the perfect way to be involved with livestock and an athletic sport at the same time," says Casselman, who is an ultra-marathon runner. "I like being involved in physical activities that are slightly taxing."

Casselmann and her husband decided that flowers probably weren't a good fit for their business. Sheep shearing would fit with blueberries and Casselman's teaching job, however.

Becoming a Sheep Shearer

"I learned a little bit about shearing from Gwen but she doesn't live around here," Casselman says. "The librarian at the school I was teaching at had sheep so I asked her if she knew somebody. She told me about this woman Emily. I contacted Emily and she says, 'I'd love to meet you. Why don't you come to one of my shearing jobs so you can observe and we can talk.'"

Casselmann observed Emily Garnett and they talked. The upshot was that Casselman decided to attend a Vermont shearing school.

"The journeyman program supported me financially for that school and that was the beginning of this whole journey," Casselman says.



Arla Casselman was inspired by Gwen Hinman, shown here with a large ram, to become a shearer. Photo courtesy of Arla Casselman



Emily Garnett, a mentor of Arla Casselman. Photo courtesy of Emily Garnett

The school lasted two days. That amount of training is a great introduction but it's not enough to make you a sheep shearer, Casselman says. But she decided the best way to build on the basics was to practice them.

"I posted something on social media that says 'I'm learning to shear and if you have a few sheep I'd love to shear them if you're willing to take on a beginner,'" Casselman says. "A farm about an hour from here contacted me. They were new to sheep and only had three. Emily came with me and just sat and watched me."

Garnett's observations were important. They helped Casselman build upon what she learned in Vermont.

"Emily and I, and most people around here, use the New Zealand shearing technique," Casselman says. "That's a pattern you follow so the fleece comes off in one piece. Getting that down was the hardest thing. After that first job I went with Emily to another job where there were more sheep and I slowly started to get my numbers up."

Casselmann credits Garnett as being "super helpful on those early jobs." She adds, "Having someone to help out if I was stuck or couldn't remember where to go to next was really helpful. Emily is really generous. I don't think everyone is willing to do that."

Fleece to Fiber

Garnett, who has been shearing sheep for 16 years, also started with a short class.

"I started with a one-day shearing school put on by the University of Vermont Cooperative Extension," she says. "But shearing isn't something you learn to do in one day. So I looked for opportunities to practice on friends' and neighbors' sheep, watched other shearers, watched videos and kept shearing. I'm always interested in opportunities to keep learning and have attended several other shearing schools since that first one."

Like Casselman, one reason Garnett enjoys shearing is because of the physical activity.

"Shearing is hard work and it requires strength but it is much more about technique than just wrestling the sheep," she says. "Like other shearers, when I shear a sheep I am following a specific pattern. I hold the sheep with my legs and feet in such a way that it can't push off the ground and move through a series of positions that allow me to efficiently remove the wool in one piece. It's really hard to do at first. But it gets easier the more sheep you shear."

Garnett, who milks goats and rakes blueberries when she's not shearing, says that her involvement with fiber arts was another interest that brought her to sheep shearing.

"I spin and knit and play around with dyeing and I've done some felting too," she says. "I'm really drawn to the idea of being part of the whole process, from raising the sheep, to shearing, washing, carding and spinning the wool, to creating something with the yarn."

There is also a social aspect to working with wool, says Garnett, who's been a MOFGA member for years. As a shearer and fiber artist she enjoys visiting the fleece tent at the Common Ground Country Fair not only to see the beautiful fleeces but also to mingle with other sheep people.

Shearing Tips

To keep fleeces beautiful and clean so they can be used for fiber arts, Garnett suggests taking some precautions before shearing day. Coats, she says, can protect fleeces but they do require careful management and even then may have problems.

"The coats may need to be changed as the fleece grows," she says. "And you have to watch so they don't rip and sheep don't get tangled in them."

She also recommends that shepherds look at how they are feeding their sheep. If hay is getting on their heads and backs, the feeder design should be changed.

There are also precautions to take on shearing day. A clean, well-lit and level space with electrical access for the shearing equipment is also good for the sheep, shepherd and shearer.

"Think about a shearing setup that doesn't contaminate the fleece," Garnett says. "A beautiful fleece before shearing can get full of dirt or bedding if the shearing floor is dirty or if the sheep is dragged through bedding on the way to the shearing floor."

Garnett suggests that an easily swept spot on a wooden barn floor is good. So is a piece of plywood or a rubber mat. "Tarps are really hard to shear on, since they rumple up, but a piece of plywood on top of a tarp is ok," she says.

Garnett also suggests keeping the sheep off feed for 12 hours as well as having them in a pen close to the shearing floor before the shearer arrives.

Edith Kershner, a fourth-generation shearer from near Searsport in Waldo County, offers additional suggestions.

"If you really love your shearer, have a competent wrangler catch the sheep and have the next one ready as the last one is being finished shearing," Kershner says. "Also, have someone to jump in and grab the wool when the sheep is done."



Edie Kershner hard at work. Photo courtesy of Edie Kershner



Casselman's favorite shearing job of all time. From left to right: Lee Straw, Arla Casselman and Emily Garnett. Photo courtesy of Arla Casselman

Kershner, whose father taught her to shear when she was 14, also urges shepherds to speak up during the shearing.

"Shearers need to know if they are doing something that is causing concern," she says. "For example, I sheared sheep for a hand-spinner and she told me afterwards that her fleeces were not as high quality as normal because I was stepping on them during a specific part of the shearing. At first it kind of hurt my pride but then I watched some pro shearers on YouTube. Then I paid closer attention to my shearing pattern and that client was right. I was putting my foot in the wrong position and diminishing the value of her fleece. Pointing that out helped me correct my pattern and better my skill."

Shearing as a Calling

Kershner says she's glad to pass shearing skills on to those who are determined enough to learn them.

"I typically will take an apprentice with me to catch sheep and trim feet," she says. "This helps them learn

how to handle sheep and build their muscles for shearing. If they can get through a few flocks trimming feet without giving up then they get to try shearing."

About half the apprentices drop out after trimming feet. Only a few that go on to shearing stick with it. The desire to become good at it has to be bigger than the difficulty. Kershner calls that desire the "want."

"I think most people can do whatever they want to do," she says. "It's keeping the 'want' that's difficult."

Kershner knows well how the "want" to become a shearer can be challenged by the difficulty of learning how. She remembers her first day of instruction from her father. He had taught her four older siblings. Now it was her turn.

"It was a hot summer day in Maryland, probably 90 degrees with excruciating humidity," she says. "I remember the sweat rolling down my brow, into my eyes, and dripping off my nose. My dad was very patient as I struggled to hold the 150-pound ewes in the correct position. I sheared about four and a half sheep that day and my legs were literally shaking at



Arla Casselman at shearing school. Photo courtesy of Arla Casselman

the end. I found muscles I didn't know I had. The next morning was even worse. I was so stiff and sore. As a kid, it was a very exciting, though exhausting, day. It was probably one of the most influential days of my life. I look back now and realize the sacrifice my dad gave to teach me this skill. He had been diagnosed with cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy at that time. I believe he taught me to shear at a younger age because he wasn't sure he'd be around to teach me later. As it turned out, he died six months later. In the following years it was my job to shear the family flock."

Shearing the family flock with one day of training was character building. Kershner's siblings had moved away and she struggled to remember the shearing pattern and to learn how to repair the equipment. She grew to hate the job. Her pride kept her going. She wasn't about to let somebody else shear the family flock.

"I'm glad I didn't realize quitting was an option," she says.

Shortly after the family moved with their flock to Maine, Kershner realized her hard-earned shearing skills could provide her with an income. Like Garnett and Casselman, she honed those skills and her confidence in them until area shepherds begin to seek her out.

Now each of the three women describe their work shearing in profound terms.

Casselman describes it as entering a zone of intensely focused concentration, similar to long-distance running. Garnett talks about focusing on one small detail of the pattern until she gets it just right.

Kershner says, "You must be careful but firm; gentle but strong; flexible but immovable; and tough but not arrogant." She adds, "Sheep are one of the most trying animals to work with and they will illuminate the type of character you have for everyone to see. What I like about shearing is it keeps me connected to things that really matter in life: my character, my work ethic, my health, my family, my heritage as a fourth-generation shearer, and the farming community."

Casselman and Garnett likely share these sentiments.

About the author: Tim King is a produce and sheep farmer, a journalist, and cofounder of a bilingual community newspaper. He lives near Long Prairie, Minnesota.



Photo by Jean English