

## **Hoof Trimming**

By: Dr. Cathy Gallivan, PhD: 'Sheep Canada' Summer 2002  
(Modified by OSMA, 2010)

Sooner or later most shepherds have to trim a few feet. The frequency of this job varies with the breed of sheep and the environment in which they are kept. In an extensive grazing environment, where sheep are required to walk long distances, hooves wear down naturally and generally require little trimming. Sheep housed in smaller areas or in pastures with soft, wet ground may require trimming at least once or twice a year. Sheep that are housed on manure packs, for instance, may require more hoof care.

The rate of hoof growth varies to some extent with the breed. Some breeds, such as Rambouillet, have been selected for their ability to travel long distances in very extensive grazing conditions. These breeds have feet that grow faster than other breeds commonly found in farm flocks grazing smaller areas, and may require more trimming. The other major difference between breeds is the hardness of their feet. Sheep with white feet generally have hooves that are softer and easier to trim than breeds with black feet. This is another example of breeds being adapted for a particular environment, as many of the breeds with black feet (such as the Suffolk or Hampshire) originated in parts of the UK where the ground may be soft and wet.

Regardless of colour, sheep feet are softer and easier to trim when the sheep have been standing on soft or wet ground (e.g. late spring) than they will be after standing on hard dry ground (e.g. mid-summer). Shepherds planning to trim the whole flock in one session would be well-advised to plan the event to coincide with a period when the feet will be softer and easier to trim.

In some flocks, foot trimming is done at least once a year on all animals, often before they are turned out onto summer pasture. However, a recent survey of sheep producers in Alberta revealed that many flock owners simply monitor the hoof condition of their sheep and trim individual animals as required.

There are a number of foot trimming tools available that are specifically designed for trimming sheep. The type of design you choose is a matter of personnel preference. Some have handles that roll back and forth to make it easier on the operators hands. Some have serrated blades and some blades are plain. Lighter-weight pruning shears are cheaper and may be suitable for small flocks, but won't stand up to trimming hundreds of animal's feet.

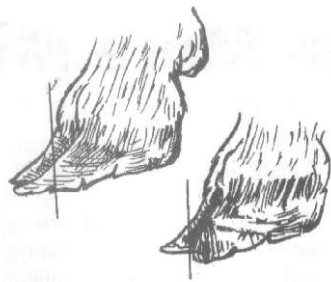
The typical method involves catching, tipping, trimming all four feet and then releasing the sheep. Every shepherd will develop his or her own style of hoof trimming. The diagram below will get you started. Be careful and don't get frustrated. You'll get faster as you gain experience. If you make a mistake and cut too deep, don't panic. It's a bit like getting a hangnail – it does hurt and it may bleed, but no one ever died of a hangnail.

As sheep have gotten bigger and stronger and shepherds older and smarter, a number of operations have turned to tipping tables or crates. Crates are usually placed in the handling system so that a sheep walks down the chute, into the crate, and can then be easily turned on her back for trimming. These crates can considerably speed up the job of foot trimming, and make it so that the shepherd can walk upright when the job is done! Some models require turning the sheep (in the crate) by hand, while others are spring loaded or hydraulically operated. When there are a lot of sheep to be trimmed, feet are particularly hard and dry, or when the use of a tipping table makes it important that the animals be handled quickly, pneumatic hoof trimmers that run off air compressors can also be used to dramatically reduce the time required.

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## Trimming Hooves:

Fig. 2



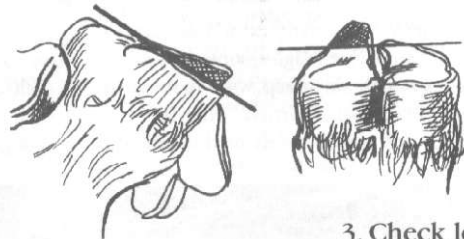
1. Cut off long toe



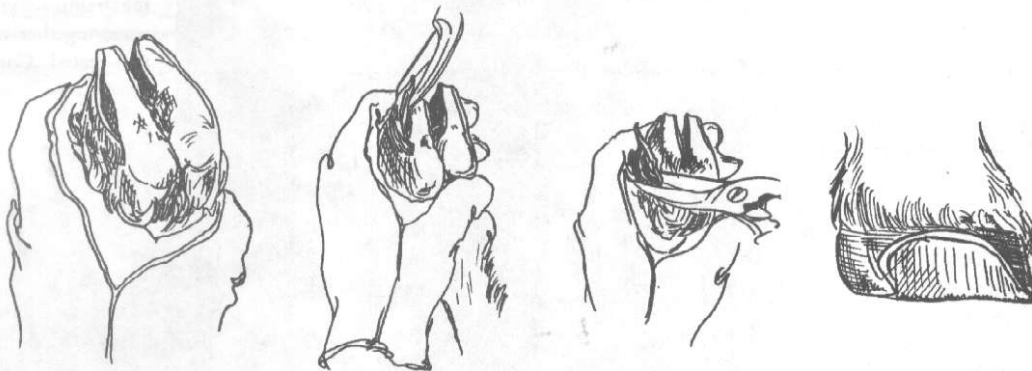
2. Clean out dirt



3. Remove excess hoof wall



3. Check levelness. Remove high side



5. If hoof wall is separating in spots, cut away outer wall in that area.  
Apply copper naphthenate to entire hoof afterwards.