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Babydolls fill dual purposes

Farmers bring ancient breed into modern times

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PETALUMA, Calif. - Deborah Walton is on a mission to revitalize the world's oldest known purebred sheep and have some fun along the way.

"Our Miniature Babydoll Southdown sheep originated in England," she said. "They were imported to the United States in the 1800s where we 'super-sized' them for their meat."

Her crusade began in 2001 when she and artist-husband Tim Schaible sold their suburban home on an acre in Santa Rosa and headed for greener pastures. They decided to explore Europe for two months and found their inspiration in the Italian hillsides.

A farm had Cashmere goats with flowing coats of silk, and they were hooked on farm life.

With a plan in motion they returned to California and found a neglected 28 grazing acres in west Petaluma, with a run-down house and huge barn for Schaible to use as a studio. They named the place Canvas Ranch, because it was a blank canvas waiting for life.

"I found some U.S. Cashmere goat breeders, but more importantly learned more and more about the diminishing Babydoll sheep. I did some research about the little sheep and thought it would be fun to have about five for their wool," Walton said as she looked over her flock of around 80 ewes and lambs. "I also discovered they are natural weeders in orchards and vineyards for several reasons."

The small size - 24 inches tall - allow the little sheep to move easily up and down hills in orchards and vineyards and to get into the fields earlier than machinery. They can't reach trellised grapes or tree branches to damage them. In addition, their little hooves break up the soil rather than compacting it. They are a perfect organic alternative to pesticides.

Canvas Ranch leases its little workers to a growing number of local wineries and orchards. Lambs join the workforce just after weaning, at about 2 months old.

"I think every animal has a dual purpose," Walton said. "I use our little sheep for grazing and the wool for baby quilts. Their wool is high quality like our Cashmere wool, and each sheep gives around 8 pounds when sheared in the spring. The wool is shipped to mills for cleaning and sold to spinners. But the little sheep are not meat animals."



Deborah Walton raises Babydoll Southdown sheep, the oldest known purebred, for wool and for vineyard and orchard weed removal.