

# SHEPHERD TRAINING IN THE NETHERLANDS

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In the Netherlands, between 200 and 300 shepherds graze their flocks of sheep on dykes, industrial areas, nature reserves or other grasslands. They commonly graze private areas and dykes as a service, and therefore the biggest challenge is finding areas to graze and being paid for it because there is a lot of competition due to public tender and hobby farmers who work for free.

Like many other shepherds, Greet and Hans Abbink provide a grazing service with their flock of sheep to graze different kinds of green patches upon request. They have volunteers helping them regularly when they shear the sheep, during lambing or when they move the flocks from one area to another. They initiated shepherd training because wanted their volunteers to be more skilled. Besides their own volunteers, they soon had volunteers from other flocks interested in their courses and later opened them to anybody who wanted to become a shepherd because there was no such school at that time.



## ORGANISATION

### Structure

The training comprises eight theoretical lessons and eight practical lessons. Besides the practical lessons the participants can come to their flock as much as they want for more practice on all kinds of subjects. Lessons are organised as day courses, taking place on Sundays (10.00 till 17.00). Besides these lessons, excursions to sheep or working dog events are also provided. Guest speakers are invited including veterinarians, livestock dealers, sheep judges and dog trainers. The main focuses of the training are health care, animal behaviour, nature management and laws and regulations.

### Location

Theoretical lessons are held on a biodynamic farm. Practical lessons are held on different farms and areas.

### Language

Dutch.

### Established

The training was initiated in 2009.

### Degree

The participants do not take an official exam. All students get a certificate at the end of the course.

### Focus animal species

Primarily sheep but they also teach about goats, cattle, horses, pigs and geese for the use of grazing.

### Profile of the participants

Most participants have no agricultural background nor education in the field. Many already volunteer at other sheep flocks, some want a change of life and career. Participants are mostly from the Netherlands and Belgium and some from Germany. There are generally more women than men; age ranges between 18 and 65 years.

### Average number of participants each year

Between 12 and 22.

## OVERVIEW

The lessons contain the following subjects:

1. Lambing time and all that happens around it. Practical lessons include working with a so-called “birth box” and stillborn lambs;
2. Housing and feeding. Practical lessons at farms and sheepfolds;
3. Organisation and activities (e.g. how to increase profits and be creative). Practical lessons: setting up an event (In this lesson they also have a guest speaker teaching them about insurance and how to set up a business);
4. Shearing sheep and hoof trimming. Practical lessons with sheep;
5. Health and animal behaviour with a sheep veterinarian as a guest speaker. Practical lessons in the field;
6. Natural grazing and nature management. Practical lessons in the field and how to set up a grazing plan;
7. Laws and regulations.
8. Working with dogs: various sheep dogs and livestock guarding dogs. Practical lessons only include herding dogs such as border collies, Australian kelpies and *altdutsche Hütehunde*.

Damage prevention measures are briefly dealt with as there are no large wild predators in the Netherlands. They have a theoretical lesson from Louise Liebenberg (see Louise's Portrait in this issue) about the use of livestock guarding dogs and electric fences.



**Further information**  
[www.schapenhoeve.nl](http://www.schapenhoeve.nl)