

BABYDOLLS IN VINEYARDS

With the right planning and infrastructure, Babydoll sheep can be a huge asset to vineyards, both in terms of monetary benefits and overall vineyard health.

Babydoll sheep are an emerging breed in Australia, based on the long established Southdown breed but smaller and with a range of fleece colours and patterns. These relatively short sheep have a well-muscled body, a springy Downs-style fleece, and a famous smile. Babydolls are perfect for vineyards due to their short necks, thick legs, solid body and gentle nature. Grazing mainly on grass, they are unlikely to damage the vines while removing suckers from vine trunks. They can provide eco-friendly mowing without using fuel or electricity and can even appreciate in value as they graze.

Babydolls are generally easy on fencing and infrastructure because of their docile temperament, making them less likely to break infrastructure such as irrigation and trellis. They also contribute to improving vineyard soil health by providing natural fertiliser and reducing the need for heavy machinery, leading to less soil compaction, improved soil fertility and structure, and healthier grapevine growth. Additionally, using sheep in vineyards can help minimise soil erosion in hilly areas.

Babydoll sheep offer effective weed control and promote a sustainable approach to vineyard management while minimising the use of herbicides, which can be expensive and raise consumer concerns. Other benefits include monetary savings, greater environmental sustainability, improved soil health, unique tourist attraction, income diversification and a high yield of marbled meat.

Vineyard owners considering using Babydolls should consider the height of their cordon wires, copper levels in their soil and the general husbandry required for the sheep. Infrastructure is needed for sheep handling and husbandry, such as sheep yards and races, watering points, and appropriate fencing, as well as shade or shelter.

Benefits

- Eco-friendly mowing & weed control
- Gentle debudding/suckering
- Reduce or eliminate herbicides
- Improved soil health
- Savings in labour & input costs
- Diversify income

Things to consider

- General husbandry
- Infrastructure - fencing, yards, water points
- Height of cordon wire
- Sprays used in vineyard
- Shelter & shade
- Shearing & crutching

Babydoll sheep must be shorn and crutched each year since they are a wool breed. Wethers and older ewes are good options for vineyards that do not want to breed sheep since they are easier to care for and cost less. Vineyard owners should also plan for supplementary feeding and where sheep will be kept at times when they cannot be in the vineyard.

With proper care, planning and infrastructure, Babydoll sheep can be a game-changer for vineyard owners, offering effective weed control, reduced soil compaction, sucker pruning and eco-friendly fertilisation for most of the year.



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