



A Free Ebook
From WoolWench
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Which Fleece?

So many fleeces so little time!

Choosing the right Wool for your project and spinning style

*Too Much Wool?! An Ebook brought
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Handspun Yarns and Fibers*

How to Choose a Good Fleece

Choosing a fleece is an exciting activity for spinners! In a newly shorn fleece we see all the potential for creating a fiber masterpiece, and hours of crafting enjoyment. However before getting too carried away, there are some things to look for when selecting a 'good' fleece, these are both general considerations regardless of the intended end use, and considerations specific to the planned end product. First we're going to look at fleece quality and choosing a raw fleece, then we will consider your project, what kind of spinning technique you will use for it and which fibers suit that style best.





Too Much Wool!

How To Choose a Good Fleece

SO MANY SHEEP SO LITTLE TIME!

If you're like me, and you love to attend wool markets, or visit a farm, and purchase your wool raw, then maybe its also because you want to take this process literally from sheep to jumper (or scarf or cowl or hat). Theres nothing better than the satisfaction you can get from sourcing your raw fibers yourself and following the same creative path followed for hundreds of years by fiber artisans all over the world:

Choosing your fiber, washing your fiber, carding and combing, spinning then knitting. You can almost magically transform these greasy fleeces into a work of wearable art!

But I know what its like, its easy to feel overwhelmed with fleece choices, whats good and whats not? Which kind of fleece should you choose and why? Where do you even start with it? What follows are are my own thoughts about fleece choices that can maybe help you get started. It doesn't take long to build up fiber confidence, and choosing a good fiber is mostly just common sense and knowing what you like!

So here you are, surrounded by lovely warm fleeces, white, grey, brown, soft, hairy, curly, puffy.. there is so much variety! How do you know whats going to work for you? Which fleeces are going to provide you with the quality you need to make your beautiful project, can be relied on to yield a good usable quantity of clean fiber and will do what you want it to do when you spin and knit with it? Well ok it isnt 'actually' going to bring you coffee and finish off the housework while you take a nap, but you do still want it to behave itself as you lovingly craft it into a beautiful yarn.

The first thing we are going to look at is the fiber quality itself, regardless of your intended end use, or even the kind of fiber you are looking for, the integrity and soundness of the fleece and fibers themselves are the foundation and first considerations in any wool project.

For this you don't need a microscope! But I want you to take a really good look at the fibers, do they look as you would expect? Reasonably even staple lengths, a good amount of crimp or curl throughout the fleece? Is the colouration pleasing and without too much staining? You can expect some staining in the less meticulously skirted fleeces, around the back end and neck areas of the fleece. If you are in the shearing shed watching the fleece coming off the sheep (lucky you!)

you can see the whole fleece, and should also see the skirting done and check that any dirty and stained areas are removed.

When you are looking at the fibers, if you can, spread out the fleece and check approximate uniformity of fiber diameter. When you look closely, you should find that the fineness of the wool from the shoulder is different than that from the back. Wool from the breech (hind leg) is usually the least fine, but what's important is how much variation there is across the fleece. A wide variety of grades in the fleece is okay, but your yarn will also contain both the fine and coarse fibers and you need to take this into account, it's good if you can find a fleece that isn't too obviously varied and the majority of it is pretty much the fineness or coarseness you want your yarn to end up.

Next take a look at the integrity of those fibers. They should be strong and resilient, and shouldn't break when you hold the ends and pull. Imagine if you had a breaky fleece and tried carding it, there would be so many different lengths in the resulting fibre it would be impossible to control this unevenness in the look of the yarn you spin from it, and it will be prone to pilling if the fibers break in the finished garment. This is just as important for art yarns and bulky yarns as for more traditional fine yarns, because you always want to have a good idea about how your fibers are going to behave when you are spinning them and after they are made into something! So the first thing to check is that it is a good, strong fleece with no weak fibers. You can do this pretty

easily, take a staple, hold the ends and 'snap' them apart, any bits break off? Then hold them up to your ear and give them a pull, can you hear any fibers breaking? You may find a heavily weathered fleece, especially the darker ones, will have lighter coloured tips, they may be more brittle so check those too, if most of the fleece is ok you may be able to just snip off any brittle tips and use it anyway.

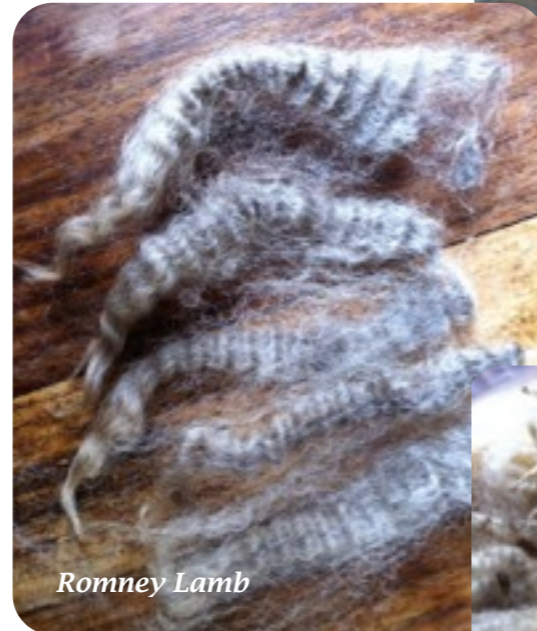


A beautiful Corriedale Fleece, very clean and showing good even and well defined crimp

It's also an idea to check the fleece for cleanliness, you might want to be sure that it's not so full of vegetable matter (VM) and/or other matter that it's going to be difficult or impossible to clean. Even if the fleece hasn't been skirted and the messy and shorter

fibers, belly wool and crutchings are still there, you can check through the rest of the fleece to assess how easily its going to wash and clean up, noting stains that might not wash out or could take up dye differently from the rest of the fleece. While doing that, its also a good idea to look for second cuts, short fibers (of 1 or 2 cms) from where the shearer has gone over the same area twice. It's always likely there will be some second cuts, but there shouldn't be so much that you cant use the fleece without the short cuts interfering in that use.

Next check out the feel or handle of the wool, does it have a suitable feel for the project you have in mind, is it what you would expect for the type of fleece you are looking at? Is it soft and fine or prickly and coarse? If you don't have a specific project in mind, I think you should at least enjoy the handle of the fleece, that doesn't mean you should only buy soft fleeces, it can also be fun to spin a big bold 'hairy' fleece with lots of bulk and wiriness, but I think that if you don't like the handle of a fleece, you wont enjoy spinning it.



Another important aspect to look at is crimp. A healthy well bred sheep should have a nicely defined and even crimp. Crimp can also tell you something about the fineness of the fibre, generally,

the smaller the crimp the finer the fibre, for example, a very fine merino with a low micron count (such as 18micron) will have around 7 crimps per centimetre, while a courser fibre such as a Romney, will have larger crimp, about 1 per centimetre.

Also, look at how even the crimp is along the length of the staple, if there is more crimp at the tip than the base, (for example) that may indicate that the fibres will stretch differently along their length, potentially causing breakages and pilling. The more even the crimp is, the better.

Checking out the staple lengths over the whole fleece can give you a good idea on how much of the fleece you can use, process and spin, if the staples are too short (or even too long) they can be more difficult to process and use, most of the

fleece should be useable or you will spend a lot of time preparing the fibers for use and have very little to show for it.

Lastly, and this is where you need to start thinking about what you are planning to make, the fleece needs to have the qualities that should suit the end use, lustrous and smooth, or bulky and lofty, curly and textured with defined locks or fluffy with less lock definition... I guess this is generally the structure and character of the fibers and the fleece itself, and how that relates to the project and the type of spinning it suits. When buying a fleece for a specific purpose, not just any old fleece will do, it should match the purpose as well as possible, in character and form. So if you know you want to make a nice lacey shawl from your fleece, you might want to choose something fine, with an even staple length that you can comb and spin worsted (strong and smooth), but if you want to make a nice woolen jumper that's going to keep you extra warm outdoors, you might want to choose something coarser, and with shorter staples that can be variable in length, suitable to card and spin woollen to create a super warm cuddly piece of winter clothing!

If you're like me though, and don't always have a clue what you're going to make with the yarn, or if you are making it to sell, or if you just plain neeeeeed to increase your fiber stash, then the most important aspect in your choice is still going to be soundness and fiber quality, if that's good, you can always decide later what you will make with it, knowing it will be sound, will wash well, and will create a good quality yarn.

Not that I have a huge stash of pretty yet clueless fleeces. Noooo, not me. No. Maybe. Well I know I 'will' use it all!



Spinning the Fleece

SPIN IT

Sometimes different fibers really want to be spun with different techniques to make the most of them. If you have a beautiful smooth and even Merino, you might not want to use a woollen spinning technique (ie Longdraw) with that, especially if you want a very fine yarn, spinning it worsted style would give you a strong smooth yarn suitable for baby clothing, lacey stitchwork, and summer shawls, ideal uses for Merino.

I often find this kind of planning quite difficult, I just love to spin so much that the activity of it is often my main (okay my ONLY) focus, but I still like to make choices about which kinds of yarn I can most successfully spin from which kinds of fibers, I had enough failures caused by trying to use unsuitable fiber for the technique I wanted to spin with, so now I think first about things like staple length, fineness, bulk, and also preparation.

In this chapter I will explain what I understand about different spinning techniques and what they are suitable for, also considering the kinds of fibers you might want to choose for each one. The most important of these to know about are; Woollen, Worsted, and Semi-Worsted spinning.

When spinning for a specific project, not only is the wool or fiber choice important, but also the decisions about how to spin it, and what kind of look and durability is required for the end project. Certain wool fibers lend themselves to different kinds of spinning, particularly in relation to characteristics such as length and strength of the fibres. Once a fiber is chosen there are more decisions to be made, including the preparation of the fibers, and the spinning technique to be used to create the yarn. Different techniques create different 'looks' and affect the feel and strength of the yarn, so the choice of spinning method is a very important aspect to designing an end product.

The three main basic types of yarn, each created with different spinning techniques, are 'woollen', 'semi-worsted', and 'worsted'.

WOOLLEN

The most noticeable characteristic of woollen yarns is that they are not smooth, woollen spinning creates a lofty, fluffy, elastic yarn in which the fibres are not all running in the same direction. To me it looks rustic and





friendly. Woollen yarns are spun to allow a lot of 'air' into the fibers, making it light and lofty. Fiber types most suited to woollen spinning are those with shorter staples, around 5cm, however longer ones can be cut to achieve the same effect (although that seems a shame to me!). The best preparation method is carding, either with hand carders or a drum carder, because this allows plenty of air to be trapped between the fibers. I think hand

carding is probably the best preparation method, because spinning from the resulting rolags is ideal. Spinning worsted requires a light hand, and the yarn should not be smoothed at all as it is moved into the orifice. A long draw technique is most suitable to really trap the air into the yarn, making it very warm to wear. I can still hear my spinning teachers' voice from way back when I took lessons in a big old woolshed still smelling of warmth and lanolin, we sat in a circle and she said: "we're spinning the air into the wool, dont grab it too hard or twist it too tight".

Woollen yarn is not as strong as worsted, and it needs to have a good enough twist in it to secure the less organised, shorter fibers, but not so much twist that it pushes all the air out by twisting the fibers too tightly together. Longdraw is best done using prepared carded rolags, drafting should be slow and even to produce the best results. The final yarn should be set in hot then cold water, and left to drip dry without spinning. Woollen yarns are very warm, are soft and light, and suitable for knitting, weaving, and items of clothing that require warmth but not necessarily strength. It is also more prone to pilling than a worsted yarn. I think theres nothing better on a cold winters day than to put on a lovely lofty feeling cuddly woollen spun jumper to snuggle into!

WORSTED

Quite a different looking and feeling yarn from Woollen, worsted yarns in comparison are smooth, very strong, have some sheen,

and there should be no fuzzy fibres sticking out. That means that the fibers all need to be running in the same direction, with an even twist, parallel to each other, and are generally all pretty much the same length. This is what gives the yarn both sheen and strength, imagine all those fibres side by side, all gripping onto each other along the length of the fibre, that's going to make a strong and durable yarn.

So the best fibers for worsted yarns are those with longer staples with good crimp, well grown and clean of VM. I think that wools such as Wensleydale, or BFI would be quite suitable for worsted spinning. Merino can also be used. The key to a good worsted yarn is the preparation. If you're like me and a little... impatient.. you will need to discipline yourself to slow down and take pleasure in preparing your fleece. I take each lock and carefully flick card the ends, and then comb it and diz it into a lovely even top. Or, you can also buy commercial combed top! Its often sold as 'roving', but if you look carefully, you will see



all the staples are nice and even in length and the fibers all laying beautifully ordered and parallel to each other. This is just right for worsted spinning.

If you are making your yarn from that lovely raw fleece you just chose and bought though, remember that fibre preparation is very

important for worsted yarn, first it needs to be well washed and free of grease, because it needs to then be combed, removing short fibres and ensuring that all the remaining long fibres are lying parallel to each other. The fibres are then dizzed from the comb into roving. If you ARE using a commercial top, and if you want to reduce the size of this to make it easier to spin a finer yarn, don't spilt it, that messes up the fibers on the edges, it's better to diz the top into

narrower lengths, keeping the fibers nice and straight.

To spin a worsted yarn the most usual method is the short draw, in which one hand is drafting back while the other is feeding the wool to the orifice, smoothing it back with the fingers as its fed

through. Twist should be kept out of the drafting triangle. This should be a compact yarn so needs a good amount of twist in it. Most worsted yarns are plied, so the amount of twist in the ply will also need to be fairly tight, but not so tight that it makes the yarn hard! I think you need to think about the end product, the more hard wearing it needs to be, the more twist you will want in your worsted yarn.



I think worsted yarns offer a very nice definition, especially in art yarns such as coils and supercoils, because it is so smoothly spun, it shows the twist of each single very clearly and can be used for nice plied effects. For knitters and crocheters, a smooth worsted yarn shows the stitch definition nicely, and is also suitable for aran knitting and patterned items. I love to spin worsted yarns and play with the plying of them, the results are always so defined and satisfying!



SEMI-WORSTED

The third spinning technique is the semi-worsted, used a lot and often the way most spinners first learn to

spin, its a 'relaxed' worsted technique that uses a different fibre preparation method from true worsted and a somewhat less fastidious method of spinning. This produces a yarn which is similar to the worsted yarn, with plenty of strength, but because it also uses short and medium length fibers it also has a degree of fuzziness even if smoothed during spinning. Suitable fleeces are between 7cm and 15cm, they should be clean, and flick carded to open the ends. If you want to blend your fibers before spinning you can also drum card them, but then you should draft the resulting batt into roving, this will help straighten out the fibers ready to spin.

Spinning for semi-worsted is a much more relaxed version of the short draw technique compared to the careful approach needed for worsted spinning. You can go faster and you dont need quite so much twist in your yarn as you do for worsted. Twist should not enter the drafting fibers.



You can still smooth the yarn as you draft and spin, but because of the different length fibers it will retain some fluffiness. The final yarn should be slightly fuzzier than true worsted, and also loftier, but not so full of air as a woollen yarn, its really 'semi' - in between!



When choosing between these preparation and spinning methods, considerations include, what type of item will be made, does it require strong durability? Or is warmth and lightness more important? Does it use a pattern that needs to be shown off with a smooth fibre or does it need a softer look and feel? Finally, finding the right fibre is crucial to creating the best yarn possible for your purpose.

I think that people often stick with just one or two kinds of fibers, simply because that's what they are used to or they are not sure what else would be suitable. It's well worthwhile trying out a whole lot of different fibers to give yourself some variety to choose from when you are spinning for a specific project. You might even be surprised at your new favourite fibers!

I Was Thinking of Making A....

PROJECT PLANNING

Sometimes you will already know what you want to make before you go out looking for a fleece. This is where a little forward planning comes in handy (not my strong point!). Maybe you found a gorgeous little girls dress you want to knit, or a hat pattern that will be perfect for the coming winter. Or you might be planning something BIG, a jersey with fancy cables and complicated stitching that you want to show off. You need some handspun! It can certainly help to know what kinds of fleeces you can use in different projects, for instance, you might find a fantastic Romney fleece, but no matter how perfect, its never going to be ideal for that newborn outfit or summer tanktop.

Knowing a bit about the fleeces you are going to use, and the requirements of your planned product, will help you match up the two aspects of your project so you can feel confident that this big smelly fleece you are choosing is going to turn out exactly right after all your washing and preparation effort!

Any project requires good usable fleece, and a consideration of the way you intend to spin that fleece into yarn. But there are additional influences on fleece choice, based on what the end product is intended to be and how it will be used. To help figure this out I will use a couple of examples.

Example one: Laceweight shawl. I want to make something light for summer evening wear, it needs to be elegant, soft because I want to wear it as a next to skin item over a tanktop or teeshirt, and I want it to be a fine yarn for a lacey pattern. So the kind of fleece I need should be a fine micron fleece, such as an 18 micron Merino, however I can also look at anything between 16-24 micron, so I could check out some Polwarth, or even New Zealand Halfbred or Corriedale lamb fleece. However, since I want something I can spin lacey and very fine, I might rule out lamb fleece, because even through it is softer, the staples are not such even lengths as in an older sheep fleece and my yarn would turn out fuzzier than I would want for the lacey pattern, I want a smooth worsted yarn to show off the knitting and keep it looking light and fine.

Also spinning worsted will make this quite a strong yarn, I will spin it very fine so I want to know its going to hold together and not be prone to easy breaking. This is another reason to choose either the Merino or the Polwarth, they can both be spun worsted and still retain the fineness and weight that I will want in the shawl. So in summary, when looking for a fleece to turn into a lightweight summer shawl, I will

look for: fineness (low micron count), and evenness of staple and crimp to spin worsted.

If I want to make something like an outdoor jersey, something to wear during the winter as outerwear over a long sleeved shirt, to keep me warm, keep the wind out, and feel cosy in, then I will be

looking for a different kind of fleece. I could spin this with either woollen or semi-worsted techniques, woollen is warmer but semi-worsted is also great for outwear as it will pill less than woollen and I plan to wear this jersey a lot during the winter! So I would be looking for a fleece that I can spin to a medium thickness, that is strong with a medium length staple, but it

doesn't 'have' to be a very even length staple throughout, as some fuzziness in my semi worsted is just fine. This is not going to be next to skin completely, and I want it to be not too prone to pilling and wear, so I would be happy with a micron count of between 25-35, I don't want it itchy around my neck or wrists so I



would still want to avoid the 35micron plus fleeces like Drysdale or English Leicester, I might be ok with a Romney, or a Corriedale could be just right. Again, I would be looking for a sound clean fleece, staple length in this case can be quite long but I could use anything from about 7.5cm and up, and it can be of a moderate

elasticity and crimp to give me some movement and spring in the yarn suitable for a jersey.

The best resource I have found for fleece choosing, at least when not actually on the farm or being hands on with the fleece! is the ['Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook'](#) by Ekarius and Robson 2011. This book has so many different fleeces with accompanying information - staple lengths, micron counts, photos of

washed and unwashed locks, of spun samples and even of knitted swatches. In my opinion its a must have kinda book and invaluable when you are selecting fleeces with the background information on the sheep and the fiber it produces. Its my favourite book in the world!

JUST A QUICK NOTE ON WASHING:

Lastly, but not least, I just wanted to add a quick section about washing your fibers. Once you have chosen your perfect fleece you want to wash it up into something that's going to be a dream to spin! Although, some people prefer to leave it unwashed and spin 'in the grease'. I find both ways to be just fine, I usually prefer to wash the fleece because often they are simply just not clean enough to use, with grit and sand and VM through them. However sometimes I get an especially nice fleece that is so nice and clean that the lanolin in it is all I get on my hands and then I am happy to spin it in the grease. I find that this kind of yarn is more compact and the fibers hold together easily as I spin it. The downside of spinning in the grease however, and why I am most likely to wash all the wool I use first, is that the grease needs to be cleaned from the wheel and bobbins, it also affects the weight and bulk of the wool and when it is washed it can lose up to 60% of its weight as the grease and dirt comes out. Also I have children, and it's simply more convenient to have clean fleece in the house, and clean hands when I am spinning because of the inevitable interruptions to bring food and drinks..

To wash fine and waxy fleeces I use first a very hot water (something around 75 degrees) with some gentle detergent, I put the wool in a mesh bag and let it sink into the water before I press it down to make sure it's fully submerged, and I leave it to sit there for five minutes, not so long that the water cools off much. I

repeat that, usually only once more with detergent, but if that doesn't seem enough I will do a third detergent soak, letting the bag with the fleece drain out as I refill the tub. After that I rinse until the water is clear. I usually try to keep the water at the same or similar temperature, although a bit cooler for the rinses. For less greasy fleeces you should find a single detergent soak is enough.



I hope this small ebook has been useful to you, maybe it helps you get started with buying your own raw fleece so you can take this wonderful fiber process right through, from sheeps back to yours! Or maybe it helps you make some choices about which kind of wool is most suited to your spinning and knitting needs.

I think that as spinners, knitters, crocheters, weavers.. we are very lucky to be able to do what we love, and to be able use a natural product to carry out our craft. Wool is a fiber that people have been using to clothe themselves, their families, to keep warm and to stay comfortable, for centuries. We follow a tradition with many of the basic steps we take in our fiber creations. Choosing, washing, preparing.. yet there are now also many more additions

we can make to this fiber process! Dyeing in vibrant colours, spinning in so many different ways. There is nothing better to someone like me, than to find this amazing fiber in its natural state, so full of potentials, and bring it into being as a vibrant useable yarn, which can then be turned into the most incredible items. Today we use these wonderful fibers, not just for clothing and physical comfort, but also as aesthetic enhancements for our environments, as art works, experimentations, design, and fashion. What I particularly enjoy about woollen fiber arts is that, no matter what the use, we always come back to the same basic thing, a sheep and its wool, and all the creative potential that a fleece contains when combined with our unlimited imaginations.



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