

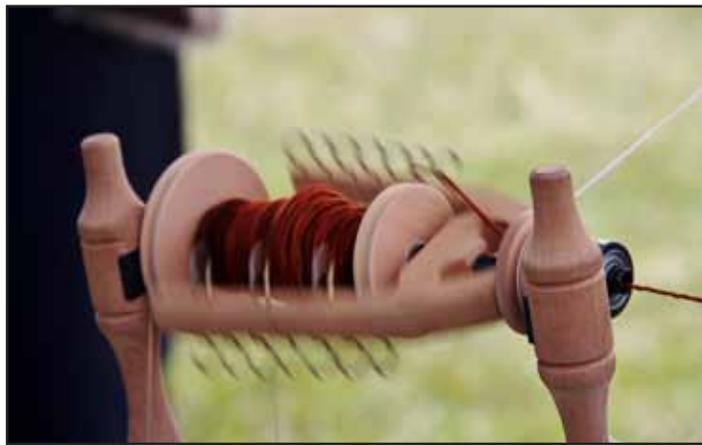


# *Bridging the Gap between Sheep and Shawl Marketing Wool to the Hand Spinner*

*by Hannah Nilsson*

The wildly popular sustainable living movement has given rise to an increased number of people hand spinning yarn. The hand spinner is no longer just a colonial woman pictured in an encyclopedia. Fiber festivals, spinning circles and living rooms are filled with young and old, women and men who enjoy this, dare I say, addictive pass-time. Simultaneously, the appeal of the sustainable lifestyle has brought on an increase in small scale farming. As fiber arts and the practice of tending sheep make a resurgence, a look into the past may prove valuable to bringing these two groups together and lessening the gap between sheep to shawl.

I once read that 'When man stepped out of the cave, the sheep was there to greet him.' Once involved with sheep and fiber, it doesn't take long to get the sense of being a part of something ancient and feel a connection to these long-time companions. In a simpler time, a family that tended sheep, harvested the meat, spun the wool, wore the clothes, drank the milk and ate the cheese. The old farmers were the end user. The care of the animal had a direct impact on the product they produced. Today there is a tendency to identify as **either** a producer **or** a consumer. Bridging the gap between sheep to shawl, farm to table is a cornerstone of the sustainable movement. What would happen if we started thinking like the old farmer? What would happen if we actually considered the uses for the wool our flocks are producing and how to make it better for that purpose? In doing so, we might bring producer and consumer closer together.



Small farmers need to maximize every opportunity made available to us by the versatile sheep. A little education of what the end user needs is a way to start bridging the gap. Whether wool as a primary product or as a by-product of a meat operation, small farms can reach the hand spinner market by considering the following: Quality, Capability and Contact.

### Quality

Hand spinning is a time consuming activity so quality is of utmost importance. Cleanliness, strength of fiber and staple length are on the top of the fiber enthusiast list when selecting a fleece.

### Cleanliness

The unwashed “raw” fleece, fresh off the sheep, is preferred in order to determine the natural characteristics of the fiber. Attention can be given to keeping vegetable matter (VM) out of wool by using hay conserving feeders, grazing in clean pastures, and coating sheep (which also protect from sun damage and exposure) and timely shearing of the fleece. Not lumping the entire fleece together at shearing time or combining the entire wool clip, allows fleece to be separated by breed and avoids blending of dissimilar wools. Taking a few minutes to grade the fleece beyond skirting belly wool will greatly improve quality which pays off when selling the fleece. Another consideration is to hire a skilled shearer in order to minimize the useless, bits of wool known as second cuts.

### Strength of Fiber

When a fleece is processed it is washed, carded or combed and spun. If a fiber is weak, it will literally fall apart

during this process. Wool “break” is a term used for brittle fiber usually caused by stress, poor health or nutrition. Snapping a lock of wool will produce a pinging sound. This indicates a strong fiber that can be processed with ease. Nutrition is paramount in growing good fleece. Because good husbandry practices are a top priority to most shepherds, growing good fleece goes along with taking good care of the flock. A fiber artist friend noted that strength of fiber and cleanliness are an indicator to them that the animal was cared for. This is an important aspect to many hand spinners who want to support humane farming practices.

### Staple Length

There is a staple length for every project under heaven. Time shearing to coincide with premium staple length. A fleece sheared too soon can negate the benefit of a long staple or sheared too late can leave a felted mess.

### Capability

Know what your wool is capable of! Knowing what you have makes it easier to market. Even though I am partial to the long wool breeds such as the Border Leicester, Bluefaced Leicester, Wensleydale and Teeswater with their long curls and luster, there is a growing market for heritage

breeds, double coated breeds and yes, down breeds. Meat sheep can be raised to produce a quality fleece. Hampshire, Suffolk, Dorset and Texel have a lovely springing fleeces that grow to a respectable 3 inch staple. Lamb fleeces from a down breed can produce a lace weight yarn suitable for scarves. Young adult fleeces are great for a worsted or sport weight yarns used to make sweaters and socks. The non-felting properties of down wool also makes it great for toys and stuffing. Hand spinners like to spin from all breeds of sheep! Border Leicester yarn is different than Texel yarn. Wool has a variety of

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capabilities. Knowing the characteristics of the wool you are growing is a real plus when marketing to the hand spinner. Taking a beginning Sheep to Shawl class at a local Sheep and Fiber festival can help you become knowledgeable about your wool.

## Contact

This is where most people believe marketing begins. It is, IF you have done your homework. You have to know what you have and how that can benefit your customer. The old farmer knew what he had and how to produce the best product because he was the end-user. The distance from sheep to shawl was as far as the barn to the house. We are walking a bit further, so we need to know our wool, then where and how to reach the customer.

The endless variety of wool and the way they represent in a skein of yarn/fiber project is one of the reasons why you see guilds, classes and festivals populated by the hand spinner. Determining the ping, luster, color, feel (handle) of a fleece is a hands-on activity. Determining breed, staple length, and to some extent cleanliness, can be done virtually. Because wool selection is a tactile process, attending/vending as a



wool grower at sheep and fiber festivals, farmer's markets and sustainable living events is a great way to get your product into the hand of the spinner. It is also a great way to build relationships with customers. Using social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest are a popular way to showcase your wool and can direct customers to your farm site or online retail presence on Etsy, EBay, etc. The key to selling online is to accurately represent what you have. Aren't you glad you did your homework? Accurately photographing and describing your wool in terms that fiber artists understand greatly improves your success in selling a product that is best purchased in person. Word of mouth is an old-fashioned yet very effective way to sell wool to hand spinners.

When selling online you rarely get a second chance to make a first impression. Fiber artists are generally loyal customers when a consistent product is provided.

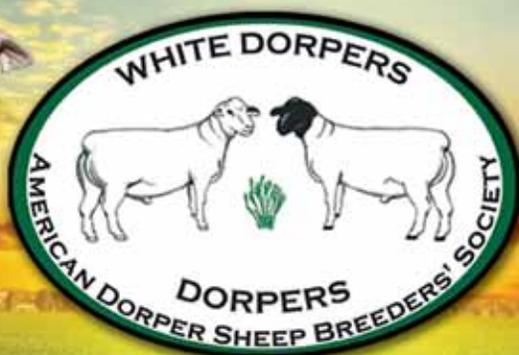
The sustainable movement that reawakened the hand spinner and the small farmer is not about market analysis though. It is about lifestyle: living a simpler existence close to the land, enjoying the benefits of a slower pace while supporting yourself. The joy of new born lambs or tending a flock of docile, woolly sheep; the satisfaction of working with wool; the whirl of the wheel and the rhythmic motion of the treadle are compensation beyond the bottom line. So, when you are walking from the barn to house in search of the hand spinner so you can sell them your wool, stop a minute and enjoy the view.

**Hannah Nilsson**, is the shepherdess at Windsor Wool Farm and owner of Windsor Wool Farm Consultation Services. She raises registered Border Leicester and Wensleydale sheep as well as Bluefaced and Teeswater crosses on her small farm in South Central Kentucky. She is known for her common sense approach to life as a shepherd, educator and author.

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