

The Value of WOOL

by Kim Caulfield

The great 18th century sheep breeder, Robert Bakewell, referred to his livestock as, “Machines for converting herbage into money,” (The Animal Estate by Harriet Ritvo, 1987). That sounds wonderful, though most of us find that our business is not quite this simple. Wool is just one product that comes from sheep, and although the selling of wool won’t necessarily make you rich, there are some things that are easy to understand and do that may increase the price you receive.

There are two common ways of marketing wool. You can sell individual fleeces to hand spinners and crafters, usually for relatively high prices, and usually by intense marketing. The alternative is to sell wool in bulk, often through a wool pool such as the one run by the Tennessee Sheep Producers Association each year. This allows you to sell all your fleeces at once, with little effort.

No matter how you sell your wool, there are many things you can do to help you get the best price.

Shearing

Your shearer can do a lot to help or hurt your wool. Most shearers are responsive if you tell them what your priorities are.

1. Obviously, treating your sheep carefully should be top priority.
2. Trying not to step in the wool will make their footing more secure, and your job easier.
3. Throwing any muck from around the tail off to the side when it is sheared keeps the rest of the fleece cleaner.
4. Minimizing second cuts (those short bits of wool that come off when a shearer goes back to smooth off a spot). Second cuts do not always come out easily, especially with the processing methods available to most hand spinners, and can make for scratchy and inconsistent yarn.



Photo provided by Roca ©2014

Colored Sheep

If you have any black sheep (in the sheep industry “Black” simply means any sheep that is not white), you need to be extra careful during shearing. If possible, shear the blacks after the whites, so there is no chance of getting even a few second cuts of black wool mixed into the white clip. If you must shear whites after some blacks, sweep the shearing area very carefully between them. Always bag any colored wool separately from white wool! Last year, there was a 180 lb. bag of lovely wool brought to the TN wool pool that had to be graded as Black because there was one colored fleece in it. If you have both white faced and black faced sheep in your flock, bag these separately. Even a single black fiber can appear as a dingy looking stain in a piece of finished cloth, so commercial buyers are extremely careful to avoid white wool that has ANY black contamination. Bag fleeces from black faced breeds, such as Suffolks, Hampshires, and even Southdowns, separately from wool from white faced breeds.

Commercial Sales

Commercial wool buyers are mostly interested in a few simple points: length, strength, and cleanliness.

Cleanliness

Try to give the buyers what they want by putting all of your best wool together,

and the rest in another bag. You do not need to pull out every piece of hay, burr, or speck of dirt, but it only takes a few seconds to pull off the mucky bits. Your wool will appear cleaner and smell better to the graders.

Strength

The graders will test for strength, so you may want to check too. Take a lock about the thickness of a match stick and snap it by your ear. If it makes an almost musical tone, the strength is excellent. If you hear fibers tearing, you have a problem. Another way to test is to take another small lock and twist it twice, then pull it with about ten pounds of force. If it holds securely, it is strong enough to survive most processing. Weak fleeces are often a result of something stressful in the sheep’s life, so you may want to double check wool from animals that have been seriously injured or sick.

Hand Spinners

Spinners are often willing to try just about any breed of fleece, but they tend to be very picky, and they have long memories. Hand spinning is done for pleasure, so fleeces that are a lot of work to process are not appealing. They want fleeces to be relatively clean and free of second cuts. Most spinners are not too thrilled to find they’ve bought dung tags, so please do remove these first.

If you sell a spinner a problem fleece, she/he will likely never come back, but if you sell clean, sound fleeces, you will develop a loyal customer base.

Finding local spinners is usually not hard. First, they tend to flock almost as well as our sheep. Spinning guilds or fiber guilds tend to spring up whenever at least three enthusiasts live within an hour's drive of each other. Ask at your local art museum, living history museum, or at any nearby yarn store. Look for fiber festivals and wool shows, and go prepared. Always carry business cards and pictures of your flock.

Marketing to individuals is all about establishing a personal connection with your customers. Spinners like to get to know the shepherd, and even the sheep.



Fleece show at the Tennessee State Fair.

1. Label your individual fleeces. If your sheep don't usually have names, consider naming some of them, or even letting your spinners help choose names for them.
2. You may want to invite spinners out to meet your sheep, and hopefully buy fleeces.
3. Some shepherds invite spinners out to see or help with shearing. This can be a great enticement to spinners, but you

may find that having many people on your farm on shearing day is more of a headache than it is worth.

4. Consider having a farm open house day or weekend, and maybe keep back a few sheep to shear for demonstrations.

Even if you do not plan on becoming an addicted hand spinner, it will help you tremendously to learn the basics. You will

gain a better understanding of exactly why some fleeces inspire nothing but curses, and others are a joy to work. You will also learn to speak the language of spinning. Men, don't be afraid of this. Some of the finest spinners I know are big, strong men.

Fleece Shows

No matter what kind of wool you raise, I strongly encourage you to consider participating in a fleece show. This can be educational, especially since some shows provide written score cards and comments. Many shows also have sales which give producers a great way to connect with local spinners.

Most of us are not going to become rich selling wool, but with reasonable care, we can improve our fleeces, and the prices they bring for us.

Kim Caulfield is a passionate wool lover. She is equally fascinated by hand spinning and the commercial wool industry. She runs a cottage industry wool processing mill, and she and her mother, Jane, raise a flock of around 150 Romneys, Cotswolds, and Shetlands near Cornersville, TN.



visit us at www.kencove.com

High-Tensile • Woven Wire • Electric Netting
Solar Products • Rotational Grazing Supplies

* Woven Wire Fence

Hinge
Joint
Knot



Fixed
Knot



Smooth
"S"
Knot



Call 1-800-KENCOVE for your FREE fence guide & catalog