



Understanding the Process of Hand Spinning

by Kim Caulfield

It's shearing season again. Shepherds are piling up bags of wool, and hand spinners are drooling and circling like hungry sharks. So, how do you get those eager spinners to look at your wool? One of the best approaches is to learn a little bit about spinning for yourself.

Hand spinning is a hobby today. It is labor intensive, but can be relaxing and rewarding. Here is a brief overview of the process, to help you understand what your customers are talking about, and why they care so much about certain processes.

Skirting

Spinners really cannot work with wool that is weak, matted, or full of dirt or trash. The first step is to sort out anything that is not usable. If a spinner gets a fleece that has already been well skirted, so there is little or nothing left to throw out, he/she will be delighted. Of course, the reverse is also true, so if you sell somebody a fleece with dung balls hidden in the middle, you probably will not get any repeat customers.

Washing

Fleeces are scoured both to remove dirt, and to remove the sticky lanolin and wax that make processing and spinning harder. Wool is easy to wash in small quantities. Most spinners wash one or two pounds

at a time. They fill a tub with hot water and a washing agent, usually dishwashing liquid (there are some companies that make detergents specifically designed for scouring wool). The wool is submerged gently in the hot suds, then left to soak and cool a bit. Sometimes it takes a second hot wash. Then, the wool needs multiple rinses. It must be handled very carefully, with no agitation or wringing, and the temperature of successive rinses cannot drop off too quickly. The wool is gently squeezed out, then set out to dry. It isn't unusual to find fleeces drying on spinners' doorsteps, or on towels in front of household heaters.

Dyeing

Many people make beautiful projects with natural white, gray, or brown wool, but sometimes other colors are fun, too. Natural dyes are always fascinating and challenging. Colors can be extracted from various leaves, mushrooms, woods, etc.. It frequently takes more weight of dry dyestuff than the weight of the wool to be dyed, so these dyes are not often practical in large quantities. There is also a lot of variation from batch to batch, depending on the time of year the dye was gathered, the acidity of the water, the mordent used, etc.. For more predictable results, there are a number of commercial dyes available that work on protein fibers such as wool. Most of these dyes require the wool to

soak in them in very hot water, after which it can be rinsed the same way it was after scouring. There is one other method that deserves a quick mention, though. It is possible to dye small amounts of wool with food coloring, or even Kool-Aid, in a crock pot or a microwave. Since these dyes are non toxic, and readily available, they make a great way to introduce kids to color theory and textile arts.

Carding or Combing

After the wool is clean and dry, it will be in locks and clumps, and may still have some bits of hay or seeds in the fibers. Spinners use various tools to fluff and align the fibers, and to help remove some vegetable matter. Hand cards look much like overgrown slicker brushes that are used to groom dogs. They produce fluffy rolls of wool for spinning soft and springy yarns. Wool combs come in various sizes and designs, but they are all designed to align the fibers in parallel for spinning smooth and strong yarns. Combs can cost more than hand cards, and require more care to use them, since those teeth are very sharp. There are also small processing machines called drum carders which also produce parallel fibers. These are a little faster, and do not cause any strain on the spinner's wrists, but they are more expensive. Relatively clean and healthy fleeces are, BY FAR, easier to process than

problem fleeces, but the work is still slow and painstaking.

Spinning

Okay, here's the part you've been waiting for. There are two general types of tools with which to spin: spindles and wheels. Spindles are generally more affordable and more portable, since they are basically just sticks with whorls on them. They are set in motion by hand. Many hang suspended while the prepared fiber is gently attenuated and allowed to twist into yarn. Some spindles are intended to have their lower ends supported in bowls, while in use. With the right spindle for your project, and a little practice, you can produce almost any kind of yarn. Some large spinning wheels; known as walking wheels, great wheels, or wool wheels; are as tall as their users. They are designed to be turned with one hand, while the other hand draws out the fiber into yarn. The more familiar styles of wheels are used by a spinner sitting and turning the wheel with a foot treadle, leaving both hands free to control the drafting of fiber into yarn. Some modern versions of these wheels are surprisingly portable. There are a few companies that makes various styles

of spinning wheels, and many individual wheel makers around the country are producing unique and beautiful wheels. Some antiques are easily restored for use, as well.

Plying and Blocking

Once a single strand of yarn has been spun, it is often twisted backwards with another strand. This process is called plying. Sometimes three or more strands are plied together. Plying is not necessary for all projects, but it does offer many advantages. Plied yarns do not untwist when their ends are let go. Plied yarns tend to be fluffier than singles, and may have a rounder appearance. A three or four ply yarn is generally much stronger than a single ply. Plying also helps to even out the yarn, since a lump in one ply will seldom appear near lumps in other strands. Whether the yarn is plied or not, it will get washed in warm water and hung to dry. This process is called blocking, and it helps to even out the twist and set it so that the yarn will be easier to work with.

Okay, this has not been detailed enough for a beginner to go out and start spinning, but maybe it has given you a better idea of the steps and time involved in processing and spinning. If you are hoping to sell some

of your fleeces to hand spinners, it will help to know some of the language. It will help you even more if you try the process for yourself, even if you only do it once.

Spinners are usually easy enough to find. Ask at local yarn shops and craft fairs. Look for local spinning, fiber, or weaving guilds. Look for local fiber festivals and see if your county or state fair has a fleece show. Spinning tends to be a very sociable hobby, so new groups spring up frequently. Many spinners are happy to teach, and some spinners and guilds even have wheels that can be borrowed or rented.

Marketing wool to hand spinners is a wonderfully interactive experience. It pays to reach out to them with pictures of your sheep, stories about your flock, and even invitations to your farm. In return, you may get to see socks, hats, and sweaters proudly touted as having come from your fleeces. What fun!

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, Cotswold and Shetlands near Cornersville, TN.

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