

Part 10 How to sort and wash fleece - Videos 18-19

Choosing a fleece

It is best to buy fleece from a smallholder or farmer who understands what spinners want. Ask for a nice open fleece and say one like a 'lace curtain' is perfect or farmers will often offer you a 'nice firm' fleece, the exact opposite of what spinners want but no doubt great for keeping the sheep warm!

You want one with minimal marker dye on it and - most important - with minimal vegetation in it, as this is very hard to get out. In many areas, the British Wool Marketing Board reserve the best fleeces for spinners and can be contacted direct or via a visit with a spinning group.

Resist strongly if you are offered a large quantity of fleeces as they are seldom good and will be hard to re-home. Most spinners will spin one or two fleeces a year at most and they are best spun within six months of shearing so just get one at a time. A medium wool fleece is ideal and 'mule' fleeces - which are a cross breed - are a great choice.

Sorting and washing a fleece

Having got a good quality fleece, it needs to be handled correctly for it to stay in good order. The aim is to have the structure of the fleece largely intact once it has been washed. A fleece consists of *staples*. These are little sections of fibre that form locks. They usually but not always, taper to a point at the 'tip' end that was on the outside when the fleece was on the sheep. The cut 'butt' end is blunter and was next to the sheep's skin before shearing. Keeping the fleece tidy when it is sorted and washed makes the carding much easier.

Sorting a fleece

It is a good idea to get any fleece out of the bag and sorted as soon as possible as it can have dung on it which attracts flies. Cover any cuts whilst handling fleece and wash your hands afterwards. Be aware that fleeces can have thorns in them from hedges so handle them gently and be aware that thorns do not always make themselves obvious

when you sort or wash a fleece and may still be there later. Many is the time I have found them whilst rinsing a fleece *after* washing.

First of all, put the fleece on a clean surface. It will be greasy and dirty so it is a good idea to put it on an old sheet or tarpaulin. Do not put it down on anything such as a lawn or straw where there are bits or it will pick them up. It is surprisingly hard to get the bits back off again. Wear an apron to prevent the grease from marking clothes and have a bag to hand for any waste.

Unroll the fleece



A fleece with length of neck wool.

Fleeces are folded sides to middle then rolled up with the inside out. The neck wool is twisted into a long length and wrapped around the fleece then the end is tucked in.

To unroll the fleece, look carefully until you find the end of this twisted length of neck wool. Take out the end and unroll the fleece from there. It is well worth having a good look until you find the end – at first glance it might not seem obvious but it really helps to keep the fleece tidy if you unroll it properly.

The unrolled fleece will still be folded sides to middle. Open the sides out carefully as the fleece may want to stick together. Check which is the outside (pointy tips to the locks) and which is the inside (blunter ends to the locks where it was shorn from the sheep). Then you will know that you are unfolding it correctly. Take your time to avoid getting it tangled up.

Skirting



The next job is to *skirt* the fleece.

This is where you harden your heart and take off everything that is not up to standard. If this is not done, the spinning process becomes much harder and less enjoyable.

There is usually quite a lot of waste from a fleece, but this can be composted or used in the garden as a mulch. Rhubarb, fruit trees and soft fruit bushes love it because it releases nitrogen slowly as it decomposes.

The sheep is shorn starting with the middle of the belly, going up one side and then up the other. This results in the belly wool being at the two outer edges of the fleece once it is off the sheep.

In other words, the outer edges consist of the wool that the sheep has been sitting on and trailing through the muck for a year so get rid of it.

Skirting a fleece.

Even if it looks okay it will have debris in it and be matted in places. So just go right around the fleece and remove a 7.5cm/3 inch strip from the edge. Where it is dirty or matted remove more if necessary. The rear end of the sheep has the coarsest and dirtiest wool so remove this on the way round, then stand back and have a look at the rest of the fleece.

The centre of the back may be matted or have hay seed on it from overhead feeding racks. It can also be 'weathered' which makes it brittle because it is constantly exposed to the elements. Remove any problem parts and while you are at it take out any bits that have dye on them from when the sheep was marked by the shepherd.

There will still be plenty of wool left from most fleeces after sorting. It is common for between a third and a half of the fleece to be discarded.

Grade the wool

This is not essential and need only be a rudimentary task. If the wool is sorted too much there will not be enough of any one kind left for a project! So just separate out any really coarse parts, usually from the rump and any very fine parts, usually from the neck wool. The neck wool can be used for fine spinning if desired.

You have of course already discarded anything that is matted but just a reminder – do not try to card and spin matted fibre. It cannot be fixed by carding, is hard to spin and does not yield good results. Get rid of it.

Washing the wool



Wool can be hot or cold soaked in buckets. Cold soaking is best for freshly shorn fleece. Hot soaking is essential if it is older, as the *suint*, or sheep sweat, goes sticky.

Buckets are better than using the bath, as the fleece can spread out too much in a larger area and can get tangled up.

Fleece soaking in a bucket. An old dish rack makes a great drainer.

For a cold water wash, soak overnight. For a hot wash, use about 20ml of washing up liquid per bucket and soak for a few hours. Drain and soak in rinse water two or three times. An average fleece will fit in two or three buckets but just wash a small quantity of it the first time.



Fleece hanging up to dry.

It can be hung on a clothes airer or mesh jumper drying frame to dry. Or outside on a picnic table or suchlike if it is not windy.

Be aware that some very greasy fleeces need special treatment, such as Merino, Wensleydale or Mohair. These are not a beginner's project so do not start out with one of these.

Very hot water and washing soda in addition to the washing up liquid helps with Wensleydale or Mohair.

Most spinners wash Merino lock by lock or put it in mesh bags and immerse in just-boiled water with washing-up liquid.