

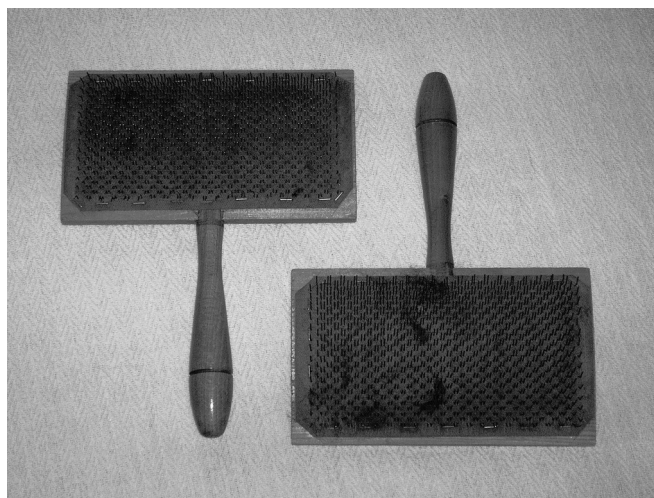
## Part 11 How to card fibre - Video 20

In Part 2 of the course we considered different fibre types and suggested that beginners can use pre-prepared fibres when first starting out. Whilst many of you may be happy to stick to these alone, this chapter covers the basics of how to card fibre if you want to learn. Joining a spinning group or Guild is a great idea if you want to practise carding as there will normally be someone who will help you.

Although carding is a very useful skill, it is fine to concentrate on spinning to start with if that works for you. The advantage is that it lets you buy fleece direct from the sheep and it is wonderful to feel you have processed the fibre from sheep to garment. This can make spinning very economical, as fleeces are often available from local farmers.

### How to card

Carding can seem tricky if you have never seen it done. Using the correct fibre – and not too much of it – is crucial to success. The photos and video included should help but it takes a bit of practise to do it properly. If it is impossible to figure it out, just do it any old way following the instructions as best you can and get along to a spinning group where someone will soon show you what to do.



*Hand carders.*

Some people like to label their carders left and right and old spinning books used to say that it made them work better if they were always used in the same hand. It makes no discernable difference. You may still come across second-hand carders which have 'left' and 'right' written on them in thick felt tip though.

Another piece of advice that used to be dished out was not to store the two carders with the teeth meshed together. Again it makes no difference so store them however is most convenient for you. What does make a huge difference is making sure you keep them clean, so do not use unwashed fleece on them. This is something that people used to do quite a bit but the grease from the fleece hardens on the carders over time and makes them sticky.

### **Are the carders in good condition?**

If you have inherited a pair of carders with teeth that are either sticky or rusty, buy replacement card clothing as it is called. This is available from spinning suppliers and is simple to attach to the carders with either a staple gun or a small hammer and carpet tacks. Do not attempt to scrub the carders clean as not only will the clothing buckle, due to having a rubber front and a fabric backing, but the dampness may remain between the wood and the card clothing causing the teeth to rust and snap off.

New carders have rough edges to the teeth and this makes the wool fibres catch on them. A piece of sandpaper rubbed over the teeth in every direction will improve their performance greatly.

### **Which fibre is suitable for carding?**

Carding works best on fibre which is up to 10cm (4in) in length; even very short fibre, as short as 1cm (0.5in) can be carded. As a beginner it is best to save any very short fibre for when you have more experience.

Fibre longer than 10cm (4in) is wider than the carders and it will hang over the front edge. This makes it difficult to deal with and as you card, it will try to wrap around the carder teeth and fold back on itself. Longer fibre is therefore better dealt with by combing. Any fibre that contains a lot of hay seed or other vegetation is also better combed, as carding does not remove debris but combing does. There are mini combs available that can comb fairly short fibres, so this is an option even with fibre shorter than 10cm (4in).

Carding is however the commonest way of preparing fleece. Carders are portable and easy to use once you get the hang of the basic technique.

## **Carding technique**

### **Pull out locks of fleece**

It is important to keep the *staple formation* as intact as possible so that the fibre can all be laid on the carders in the same direction. Otherwise some will catch round the teeth and not be carded properly. So hold the fleece in one hand and use the other hand to pull out one lock at a time with a sharp tug. It should come away cleanly, leaving the rest of the fleece tidy.



*Pulling out locks of fleece ready for carding.*

Sometimes spinners pull out a number of locks in advance and place them in a box or basket. Then you can card without having to keep stopping to pull out more fibre. The carding can also be done in a batch before starting on the spinning.

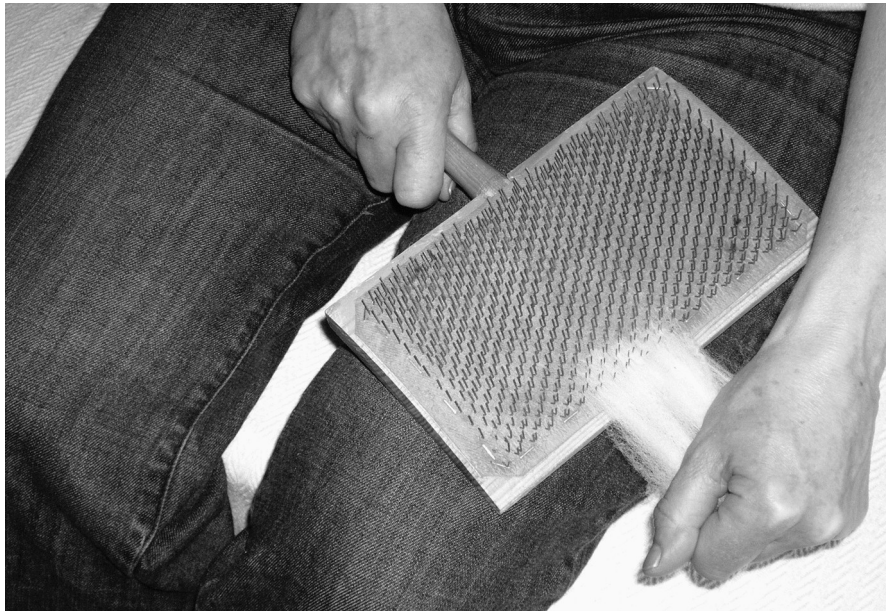
It is a handy thing to take to spinning meet-ups and carding goes quickly whilst chatting to friends. If you card a batch of fibre, lay the carded rolags in a basket or box for future use.

Do not do too many at once as they are best spun reasonably fresh. If they are left for too long they would need a re-carding briefly before use, because the little microscopic hooks on the wool fibres begin to stick together. So don't try spinning two year old rolags.

### **Flick the tips**

If you do this before carding, the job is half done. Flicking the tips may be all that is necessary if the fleece is already nice and loose. The idea is to open up the tips of the locks because they are the part that needs the most attention.

If you do not do this, it is likely that some tips will remain stuck together whilst the rest of the fibre is carded. When you come to spin them, the whole lock will come away at once if the tips are not opened out, resulting in a thick lump in the spinning.



*Flicking the tips prior to carding; this is a great shortcut and ensures wool is carded well with minimum effort.*

To flick the tips, hold an individual lock firmly in one hand by the butt end. You need to hold it firmly enough that the fibre will not pull out of your hand. Sit one of the carders on your thigh, teeth uppermost and hold it with the other hand. Drag the very tip of the lock through the carder teeth to open it up, without carding the rest of the lock.

It can help if you press the tip gently into the carder teeth with a finger. The tip should separate into individual fibres and fluff out a little. You are aiming to flick *only the very tip of the lock*, usually about 0.5-1cm (0.25-0.5in).

### **Lay the locks across one of the carders**

We will call the carder you are now going to work with carder A. The other one is carder B. We will call the edge that has the handle on it the back edge and the edge opposite the front edge. Remember which hand is holding carder A and which is holding carder B. Write it on the back of your hands as a reminder if necessary but not on the carders.

The carders do not change hands unless you put them down to do something else so this will help to keep track. Which way around you have your hands depends to some extent on whether you are left- or right-handed, but it really does not matter, so hold them whichever way feels comfortable. And it does not actually matter if the carders switch hands, it is your hands that are really A and B!





*Locks laid on carder ready for carding.*

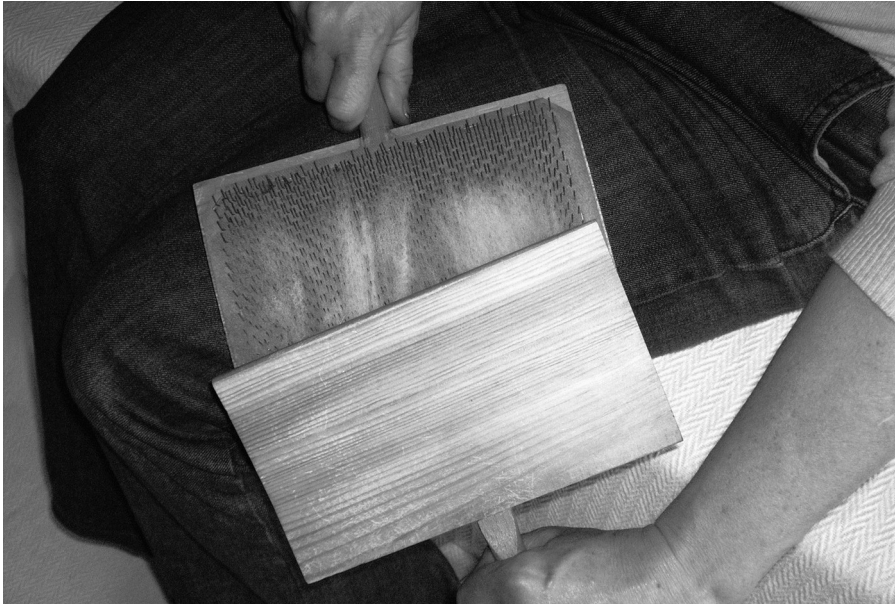
Sit one of the carders (this will be carder A) across your thigh with the teeth uppermost as you did when flicking the tips of the locks. The handle should be towards the inside of the leg. If the left hand is holding the handle, the carder should be on the right leg and vice versa.

Lay four to six locks, with their tips already flicked, across the carder from front to back - that is the narrowest way, from the handle to the front edge. The locks should lie fully on the carders with no fibre hanging over the edges. Resist the temptation to add more locks as they will fluff up a lot when you card them.

If you put too much fibre on the carders at one time the carder teeth will not penetrate it and no matter how hard you try the fibre will not all get carded. This means starting out with what looks like too little fibre on the carders.

## **Begin carding the fibre**

Leave carder A where it is, on your thigh with the teeth facing upwards. Restrain it by holding the handle.



*Begin carding the fibre.*

Pick up the second carder (carder B) holding it as if it was a hairbrush with the teeth facing downwards. Stroke carder B over carder A but *do not mesh the teeth*. The carding happens in the space between the carders. If you can hear a grating sound you are meshing the teeth and need to hold the carders further apart.

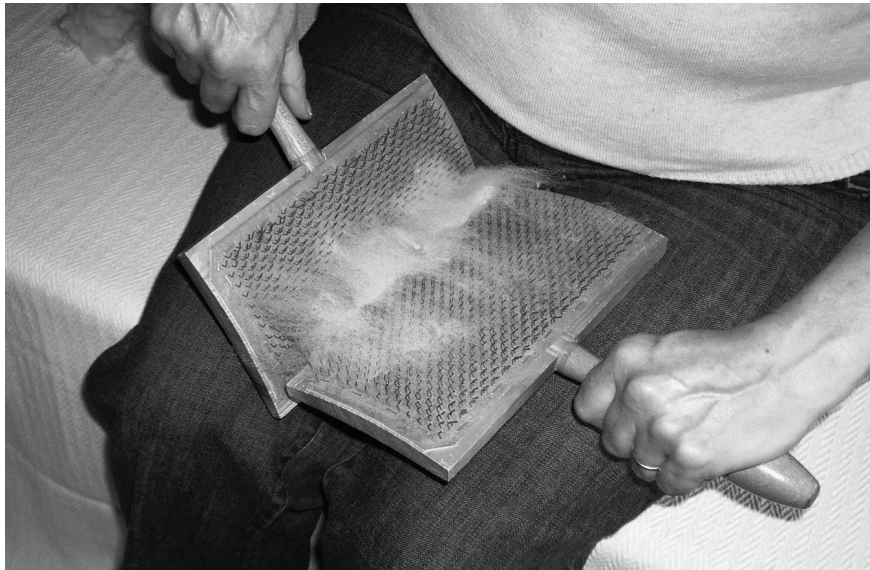
You should find that this is a gentle action, not one that needs a great deal of force. You cannot deal with matted or felted fibre by carding – you will just tear the fibre apart and it will take a great deal of effort whilst yielding poor results. Carding is meant to separate the fibres of a good quality fleece. Stroke carder B over carder A four or five times. Some of the fibre will transfer from carder A to carder B.

## **Transfer the fibre**

The next step is to transfer all of the remaining fibre from carder A to carder B. This is a bit tricky to explain and when you first hear it described or even see it done, it can seem impossible to understand.

If you cannot get it to work, simply remove the fibre the best way you can and if it needs more carding replace it on the carders and do it some more. It will still work reasonably well but won't look as elegant!

Turn carder B (which is the carder on the top at this point) so that the teeth face upwards. Do this without changing your grip on the carder if you can.



*Transfer the fibre.*

Lay carder A on top of carder B also with the teeth facing upwards and with the front edge of carder A right up by the handle of carder B. Now tilt both carders so that there is a 90° degree gap between them. Lift what was the top carder upwards and the fibre should transfer to it. Turn it back over again without changing your grip.

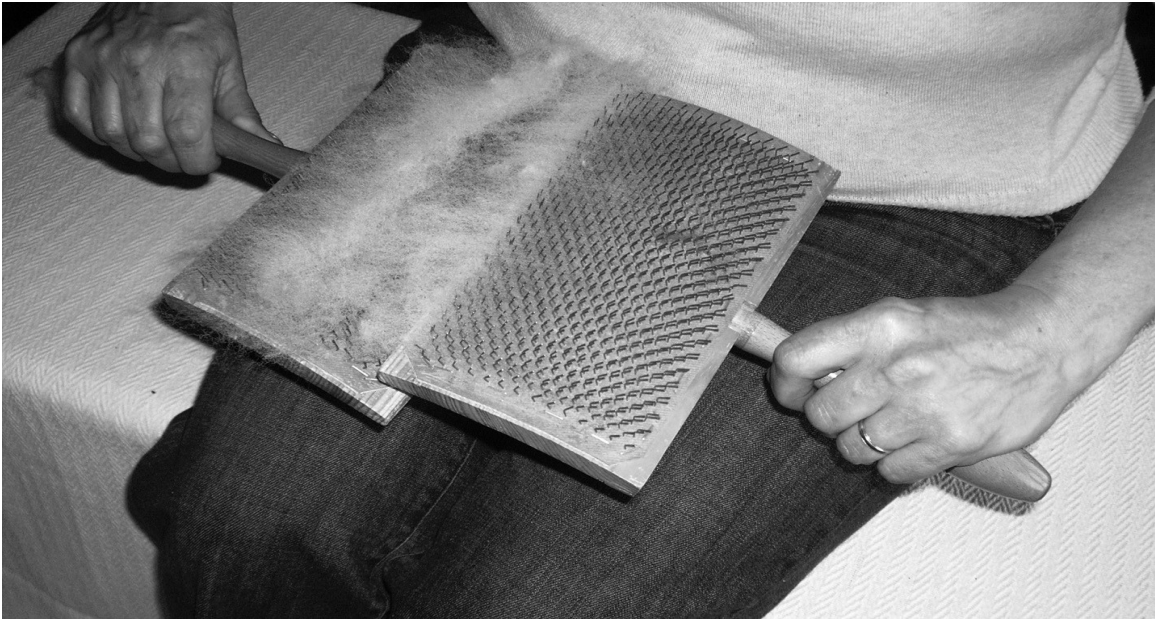
Now continue to card with the carders in the same position as at the beginning, only this time you are starting with the fibre on the top carder. Then repeat the transfer instructions to get all the fibre back onto one carder. You are then ready to take the fibre off the carders, or doff it.

### **Doff the fibre**

Doffing the fibre means taking it off the carders and is a bit like transferring it from one carder to the other but also a bit different. You turn carder B over so that both carders have the teeth uppermost and put them front edge to front edge: that is the edge opposite the handle. Do this without changing grip. By now you probably feel like a contortionist but it really is possible. As before, turn carder B to face away from you rather than side on before trying to turn it over.

Then tilt both carders slightly so that the front teeth mesh together and lift the empty one followed by the full one. This will lift the fibre free of the carders. It can then be used as it is (called a carded batt) or laid onto one of the carders and gently rolled into a sausage shape (called a rolag).





*Doffing or removing the carded fibre from the carders.*



*Finished rolag.*

The carders can be cleaned of any remaining fibre once all the carding is finished. Do this by using one carder to lift the fibre out of the other, or use a dog comb. It is easy to forget to do this when you start carding again and leaving it could result in leftover white fibres appearing in a brown fleece when they are used next time.