

Part 6 Sourcing a spinning wheel

Learn to spin before you buy

One of the biggest mistakes is to assume that all spinning wheels work as well as each other. The two main factors that will govern how easily you learn to spin are the wheel you are using and whether you know other people who can spin. It really is not possible to try out a spinning wheel if you cannot spin. Unfortunately many people buy second-hand wheels that seem like bargains but are actually only suitable as ornaments.



A classroom with some of the many modern spinning wheel designs available.

Spinning groups often have wheels that they lend or hire out to members who want to learn. Borrowing or hiring a wheel lets you take your time and decide which one is best for you. If you go along to a Guild, members will have different makes and styles of wheel so it is possible to find out more about the different types. There are often second-hand wheels for sale too. Good, professionally-made wheels all do the same job but some are more portable than others, some look more traditional and others more contemporary.

It is probably a bit harder to teach yourself to spin on a wheel than on a spindle because there are more things that can go wrong. If you do get stuck, seek the advice of local spinners or book a day's course. Often the things that self-taught spinners get stuck on are very simple to sort out – if only you know what to look for.

Just one point here though – it is not polite to go along to a spinning group and expect members to spend all day teaching you to spin free of charge. They have come along to do their own spinning and see friends. Whilst they will more than likely be delighted to help you out and give tips, do not expect a full day's spinning lesson. If you need more focused help, ask who does classes and workshops in the area.

Get a modern wheel and buy from an established maker

Get a modern spinning wheel that is designed and made by a recognised manufacturer. This can include second-hand wheels as some modern makers have been producing wheels for many years. There are a number of good manufacturers and pretty much any of their wheels will spin well and last almost indefinitely. Information is included about some of them in Part 12.

I have not mentioned them all, but the list is a good selection and they are available in a number of countries through local spinning supply shops and specialist mail order companies. The timber used varies from wheel to wheel and can change as new styles are introduced so a list of materials used is not included. It is best to check with the supplier if you are buying a new wheel. All of the manufacturers I mention use wood from reputable sources. On some the actual wheel is made from fibre board, while some include laminates.



Ashford Traveller spinning wheel.

Ashford

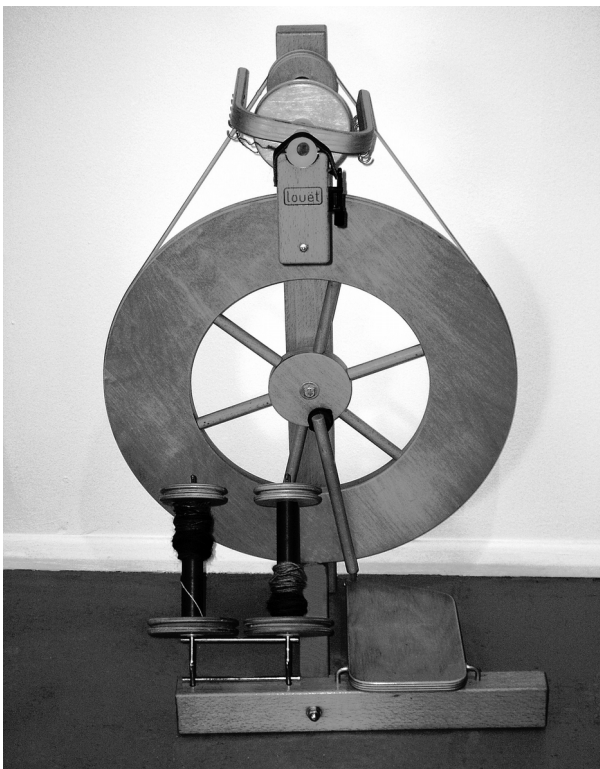
Made in New Zealand, these are probably the commonest wheels in use worldwide. They are versatile and offer a range of designs including folding options. Most of the wheels are available with either single or double treadle and Ashford sell a conversion kit which can change a single treadle wheel to a double which is very handy if you buy an older, second-hand one.

The Ashford Traditional can often be picked up second-hand. The wheels have a good range of accessories available. Older wheels can easily be upgraded with a new, high-speed flyer.

People sometimes start out with an Ashford Traditional wheel then change it for one that is more portable, which is why Ashford Traditionals are often available second-hand and relatively cheaply.

Louet

Made in Holland most of these wheels have a large orifice which can be handy when learning. Some Louets have an orifice with a removable centre part, giving a choice of two different orifice sizes. These wheels are robust and well engineered. The Louet S10 can often be bought second-hand but do not be tempted to buy one unseen from an online auction site.



They are robust wheels and there is little that cannot be fixed but I know someone who bought one unseen only to find that the bobbin was glued to the shaft of the flyer as it had been used for display purposes. Louet do a range of versatile wheels including some that fold.

They also do a skeinwinder which attaches to the top of some of the wheels and is very handy indeed. High speed bobbins are available to obtain a wider range of ratios and these are a good addition to older wheels.

Louet Victoria spinning wheel.

Lendrum

Made in Canada, these are double treadle wheels that fold up. The wheel is tilted towards you, which some people find helpful, and they are easy to fold. Many owners recommend them and find them versatile and easy to use but they are quite a bit heavier than some other folding wheels.



Majacraft

Majacraft wheels often have a wire hoop instead of an orifice on the flyer. The treadling can be a little tricky when you are learning and they do not fold as easily as some others such as the Ashford Joy. You actually have to dismantle them and it takes a bit of time to re-assemble.

Schact

Made in the US the Schact, like the other wheels mentioned, has its enthusiasts. It is expensive and a beautiful piece of engineering. The thing that puts me off is that changing the bobbin is a fiddle and involves an extra stage, as opposed to the Ashfords where you just 'unclick' a bearing, or the Majacraft or Timbertops where you unscrew one end of the flyer. Louets are the easiest of the lot – you just lift the bobbin out.

Majacraft Little Gem folding wheel.

Schacht wheels are also heavier and quite large. Schacht make a folding wheel called the Sidekick which is unusual in that the wheel is edge on to the spinner rather than side on. It then has a treadle board either side of the wheel.

Buy a wheel to suit your lifestyle

As you will have gathered by now, spinning tends to be a social activity. After a while, you may therefore need a wheel that can easily be taken to classes, workshops, spinning demonstrations and group gatherings.

Think about the size of your car, as well as the size of your living room when choosing a wheel. If you use public transport or are likely to share a car with other spinners, choose a wheel that is lightweight and folds into a nifty carry bag, such as the Ashford Joy or Louet Victoria. I have even put an Ashford Joy in the front bag of my Brompton folding bicycle and cycled to a spinning group complete with wheel! Obviously a hand spindle would be a more usual choice for this mode of transport but it can be done.

A wheel that will not fall apart or otherwise suffer from being transported is also handy. Some have legs that push into place rather than being attached with screws, pegs or bolts. In theory they should stay put but tend not to. They loosen over time if the wood shrinks and contracts due to changes in temperature and humidity.



Folding wheels are hard to get second-hand and quite a lot more expensive than ordinary wheels. A second-hand Ashford traditional or Louet S10 or S15 is a good choice and probably the easiest to obtain.

They are robust wheels unlikely to have much wrong with them and spare parts are easily available. A non-folding but compact wheel like the Ashford Traveller is also very transportable in the back seat or boot of a car.

If you put a wheel on the back seat be sure to put a seat belt around it so it does not hit you on the back of the head if someone drives into the back of you.

Ashford Joy folding wheel, available with single or double treadle.

I have a small car and can fit two or three non-folding wheels on the back seat depending on what they are. They would not be so easy to take on public transport, especially if crowded: a folding wheel is better in that case.

Clean the wheel before you use it

It is common for people who have bought a perfectly good second-hand wheel to find they cannot get it to work properly. Check it carefully because it may well have been used to spin wool in the grease – i.e. without washing it first. The two things that tend to cause problems are a build up of grease in the orifice and a groove that has worn to a cutting edge on the flyer hooks.

To clean the orifice, soak a piece of paper towel in oil and then wrap it around the unsharpened end of a pencil and push it into the orifice. It will take several goes and often the grease will not come out until it has been soaked in oil. Do not be tempted to scrape the oil away as you may damage the inner surface of the orifice.

I once taught a class where someone was sure the orifice on her wheel was clean but the yarn kept breaking. She cleaned the orifice but not thoroughly as she was really not convinced it needed it. When everyone went for lunch, I had another go and gave it a real

soaking. After lunch, she began spinning and a large plug of solid grease popped out. There had been hardly any space left for the yarn to get through at all, and the grease also causes friction. Sometimes there is grease on the flyer itself where the yarn has travelled over it and this should also be removed.

Use sandpaper to smooth down rough edges on the flyer hooks. While you are at it, remove any rough edges on the bobbins and the wooden parts of the flyer. Do not sand the groove on the bobbin where the drive band or Scotch tension goes, or the band will slip. It is fine to spin in the grease if you want to, but you will need to properly source and clean your fleece – and clean that wheel regularly.

Don't make your own - and don't buy an antique

When I teach beginners, I take a spare spinning wheel with me in case someone turns up with a 'tricky' wheel. Often this is one that even an expert would struggle to use; sometimes it will not spin at all because some vital part is missing or very slightly out of alignment. It takes seven or more goes to make a properly functioning spinning wheel and even then it will not be as good as a precision manufactured one. An antique wheel can be even more tricky and they can be worn out and hard to repair.

So buy a well known make of spinning wheel, either from a spinning wheel supplier or second hand from someone who is actually a spinner and will ensure the wheel is in working order before selling it.