

Why wash your fleece?

It's perfectly possible to spin fleece straight from the sheep without washing it, but this technique may not suit your purpose or your wool. Raw, unwashed fleece contains *lanolin* (grease produced by the sheep), *suint* (dried sweat), dust and farmyard dirt, and fragments of vegetable matter. Spinning traps some of this material deep in the twisted fibres, and even soap-and-water washing will not remove all of it from the finished yarn. In addition to this, the colour and character of the yarn will change during the washing process.

There are a range of washing methods to produce everything from lanolin-rich fleece for spinning 'in the grease' to individual locks suitable for spinning fine lace. Once you've decided how you want to spin your fleece, you can choose the washing technique(s) to use.

Before washing your fleece

If you have an entire fleece, it's a good idea to inspect it. Lay it out on a sheet and check the quality of the skirting: if there are any dags or other solid lumps, remove them and dispose of them in a way that minimises any possibility of spreading animal disease. Put them in the non-compostible rubbish, or bury them deeply in the garden or in an active compost heap. Don't leave them out where birds or other animals could carry them away. You may wish to let the supplier know that the fleece was not well-skirted. Vegetable matter (VM) – hay, straw and other bits and pieces – can be difficult to remove from the fleece. Pick large bits out before washing; smaller bits will fall out as you spin. Consider discarding areas that are full of VM, or at least washing and prepping it separately to avoid contaminating cleaner fibre. Check the underside of the fleece and remove any second cuts (short clumps of fibre) that will form nepps in your spun yarn. You may wish to grade and sort the fleece by colour, or by fineness and length of fibre as suitable for different purposes before washing.

Contacts and links

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The Rare Breeds Survival Trust www.rbst.org.uk

The British Coloured Sheep Breeders Association
www.bcsba.org.uk

The Natural Fibre Company offers fleece processing and spinning services, as well as fleece FAQ sheets for download.

www.thenaturalfibre.co.uk  The Natural Fibre Company

The Association of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers is the parent body for over 100 local guilds in the UK and through the Online Guild has members in many countries worldwide. It is our remit to preserve, improve and promote expertise in hand weaving, spinning and dyeing; and to encourage excellence of craftsmanship in texture, colour and design. We support this series of leaflets as we can see positive benefits to all our members. www.wsd.org.uk

Ravelry is a website where knitters, spinners and other fibre craftspeople from across the world meet. There is information about preparing and spinning fleece in some forums, and there are UK-specific groups where you may find information about sources of fleece. www.ravelry.com

This leaflet is one of a series planned for free distribution to encourage and improve links between UK wool producers and handspinners.

It was produced with assistance from

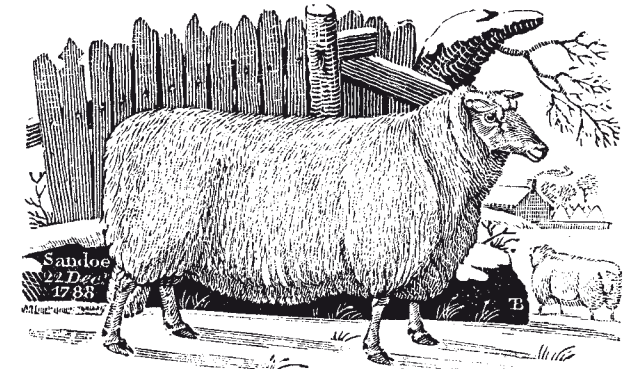
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A Cumbrian co-operative of wool workers & producers, members of which organise Woolfest.

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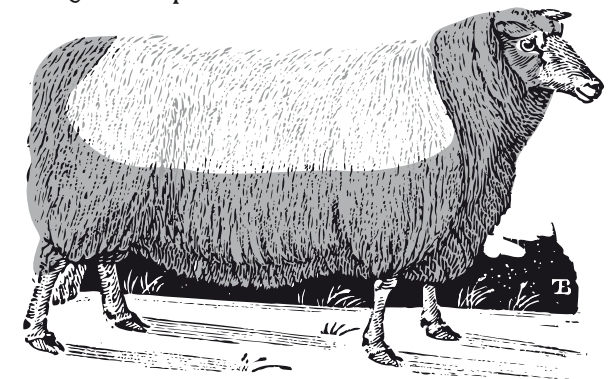
woolfest 

Washing fleece for handspinning



The Leicester Improved Breed developed by Mr. Bakewell of Dishley in the early 19th century.

“The finest and best wool of the fleece is that on the shoulders. Then follow in order of merit the wool from the flanks, the sides of the neck, and the hips, these four forming the best parts of the fleece.”



Equipment

If you wash fleece in the bath or kitchen sink, take care to prevent fibre and grease clogging the drain: remember that lanolin not bound to detergent will solidify as it cools. Temperature shocks and too much movement of the fleece when it is warm and soapy may cause fulling or felting: handle it as little as possible while washing, always use lots of water, never allow water to run directly onto the fleece, and try to allow the water to drain out of the fleece naturally. Many detergents can be used, ranging from dishwashing liquids to compounds intended for scouring wool. In general you should use more rather than less, and rinse thoroughly to remove soap residues. Avoid washing detergents labelled 'biologically active', or 'contains enzymes', as these may damage the wool proteins. Use an appropriate detergent if you have a septic tank.

Different methods of washing suit different fleeces and purposes, so wash samples before deciding which technique to use for your fleece.

Cold water soak and wash

This is most suitable for British native breeds and other fleeces that do not contain large quantities of lanolin. The end result is reasonably clean fibre that still contains lanolin for spinning in the grease. Simply soak the fleece overnight in cold water, rinse until the water is clear, then dry the fleece. The water in which well-skirted fleece was soaked is excellent for watering the garden!

Hot water and soap

If you wish to spin (or dye) clean fibre, or are dealing with fine, soft fleece from merino, merino-cross breeds and longwools that contain a lot of lanolin, then soap and hot water are needed. This creates perfect conditions for felting, so agitate the wet fleece as little as possible during the washing process. Mesh laundry bags are very useful for washing small quantities of fleece, as they can be handled with ease; mesh baskets can be used to handle larger amounts. Don't pack these too full, as the water must move freely through the fibres.

Lanolin starts to melt at 35°C/95°F, so the water must be very hot: in general, if you don't need gloves, it's not hot enough. Add a kettle of boiling water if necessary. Then add a lot of detergent, at least 1 tsp/litre, enough to noticeably colour the water and make it feel slippery and mix. Add the fleece, pressing it gently into the hot, soapy water, and leave it to soak for no more than 20–30 minutes (if the water cools, any lanolin not bound by detergent will set on the wool again). Gently hold the wool back and drain the container. Remove the wool, refill with hot water and rinse at least twice using the same technique. It's a good idea to wash a small quantity to check that one wash is sufficient; some fleeces may need two or even three to remove all the grease.

Washing individual locks

If you have a fine fleece that you intend to comb for worsted or spin from the lock for lace, it may be worth washing individual locks using techniques developed by Margaret Stove. If necessary use a flick carder or dog comb to open the tips. Hold each finger-thick lock firmly at one end, dip it into water as hot as you can stand on your hands, and then rub the rest on a bar of household soap (ie not one that contains moisturising oils) until it is thoroughly coated in lather: a thick lather prevents felting. Rinse in the hot water, and repeat to wash the other end. Rinse by swishing gently through warm water, leave to drain. Roll clean locks in a towel to remove excess water, then leave to dry.

Alternatively, arrange finger-thick locks side-by-side in rows down the side of mesh bags, all tips pointing in the same direction. Run a coarse thread through the bags to separate the rows if necessary. Wash these by soaking in hot water and detergent as described above. Carefully roll up the mesh bag under water and squeeze gently, then remove it before draining and refilling the wash container for further washes or rinses. When clean, roll in a towel to remove excess water and dry as usual.

Suint Fermentation

This is a traditional method of cleaning fleeces by

breaking down the suint and lanolin biologically. It takes time, space, and generates quite a strong farmyard smell. It also requires some warmth, perhaps in an unheated greenhouse.

Soak a greasy, dirty fleece (unwashed, not even rinsed) in lukewarm rainwater for 5–7 days. When ready to use the vat should smell strongly of manure or farmyard, and a milky scum will form on the surface. Add another dirty fleece, remove the original and, if desired, wash it with soap and water to remove the last of the grease and the smell. As additional fleeces are soaked, the culture should strengthen until only two days are needed to clean the fleece. Rinse the cleaned fleece with cold water and dry thoroughly; the smell will usually fade and disappear over time.

Drying the fleece

Remove as much water as possible; fleece in mesh bags can be 'spun' by whirling the bag (hold it securely!) around for a few minutes, and some people use salad spinners. Small quantities can be rolled in a towel to remove as much moisture as possible, then spread on newspaper and left somewhere warm indoors. Netting can be pinned to a folding clothes-airer to make shelves to dry batches of fleece. Larger amounts can be spread on wire netting or sheets outside, but take care that the wind doesn't blow it away.

Often the tips of the fibres of paler fleeces remain noticeably darker than the rest of the lock, even after thorough washing. Try spinning a sample, as the colour will blend into the singles. If you're unsatisfied with the result, you can pull or even cut dirty or damaged tips off the locks either before or after washing.

Wise precautions

Even if it looks clean, raw fleece contains farmyard dust and dirt. Store your fleeces away from food, pets and children. Everyone should wash their hands thoroughly after handling a fleece, wet or dry. Avoid getting wash water in open cuts.
