

Program notes from October Meeting of Cherry Valley County Speakers

Sorting and Washing Your Fleece

Most Fleecees that are purchased from a sheep grower will be rolled up and tied with a paper string. The fleece should be placed on a large, open surface; the string cut and carefully removed and the fleece gently and carefully unrolled so as not to separate the fibers. The fleece should be unrolled with the clean side down. Having the outside or dirty side up and visible will enable you to more easily identify the different areas.

When a shearer rolls up a fleece it is done in a specific order. Each side is lapped over the back then the tail section is folded up and in over the sides and lastly the neck is brought up and over the package, making a neat square that is then tied ready for marketing.

When you have the fleece completely unrolled with the clean side down you should look it over for any noticeable burrs, chaff, timothy heads, etc.. The fleece should be skirted at this time if it was not done at the time of shearing. Skirting is the term used for the removal of the tag ends that are heavily coated with manure and for the removal of the belly section. The belly section is often so worn and the fibers so weak that they are not fit for spinning. If you are sorting a, particularly long fibred fleece the belly may be usable. The only way to do this is by looking at it and pulling on a small hank of the fibers to test for strenght.

After you have finished skirting your fleece you are ready to sort the remaining wool. The reason for sorting a fleece is to separate the fibers according to their length and fineness, since these qualities determine the finished appearance of a given yarn.

If you are interested in spinning an entire fleece for a specific project then it is possible to simply mix and tease the entire fleece until you are sure that all the fibers have been uniformly blended and in this way insure a uniform look to your yarn.

If you have decided to separate your fleece you should know that the prime area is the shoulders and sides, this area has the longest and the finest fibers. The rear can be as long as the shoulders but a close examination will reveal coarser fibers. The back and across the hips would be the second best section and the belly and tags comprise the third and poorest section of the fleece.

This separating into three groups is a simple, basic sorting and can be carried a step further by resorting these group again looking for length and fineness. In this way it would be able to end up with 6 or 7 different, separate piles. At this point the sections could be bagged and labeled. They are ready to be teased, which is a careful separating of the fibers to allowing dirt, chaff and vegetable matter to fall away leaving the wool ready for washing.

Washing a Fleece

I will describe two methods of washing wool that suit the home situation. The first method is to take the sorted and teased wool and place it evenly around the bottom of the washing machine. Fill the machine with warm water and add about 1/2 cup of a low suds detergent and a 1/2 cup of borax. DO NOT ALLOW MACHINE TO AGITATE as this will matt the wool and ruin it. Allow the wool to remain in the warm suds for at least an hour. Several times during this period take your hand and gently press down on the fibers- avoid a side to side motion. Put the machine on the spin cycle and extrude the dirty water. Turn the dial to rinse and let the machine fill with clean warm water-again-DO NOT LET THE MACHINE AGITATE* rinse the wool by

repeated hand actions in a downward motion-then spin. Repeat the rinsing two more times. Remove a section to blot dry in a towel. Test the dried section. If it feels slippery to the touch it needs more rinsing. If it feels sticky or tacky it needs another washing.

After the proper degree of cleanliness is attained - removed the wool, being careful not to tangle the fibers, and place out doors if possible to dry. It can be dried indoors on a clothes rack or heaped loosely on thick towels. Make sure that the wool is absolutely dry before being stored, this will avoid mildew.

The second method of washing requires set tubs, a double sink or several clean pail to hold water. Water as warm as 140 degrees is used along with a low suds detergent and borax. Small segments of the sorted, teased wool are washed in the warm water and then gently squeezed and rinsed in clear, clean water of the same temperature three times. Having three separate pails of rinse water facilitates this process as the clean wool can be moved from one rinse container to the next. The small sections of clean wool easily pin to the clothes line to blow dry. They are then ready to be teased, carded and spun.

A new method of natural washing is in the process of being investigated by Deloria Chapin of Pompey. Mrs Chapin placed a large non-rusting screen on saw horses. On this screen platform she placed an entire fleece, dirty side down and left the fleece to be washed clean by the rain and dried by the sun and wind. The length of time required to clean the fleece naturally depends upon the amount of rain during a given time. This seems to me like an easy, natural method of washing a fleece during the summer.

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