

Some Handspinning Questions and Answers

The Blacksheep Handspinners Guild

What is the Blacksheep Handspinners Guild?

We are a group of people excited about handspinning and allied crafts, and interested in sharing and promoting them. The Blacksheep Handspinners Guild has met continuously since 1974. We get together once a month, from 11 to 3 on the second Saturday of the month, to spin, talk about spinning, show off our projects, and plan special events. Our meetings are at All Saints Catholic Church in Lansing, except in December, June, July and August, when we meet at members' houses. Every year in January we organize a Roc Day* Celebration and Fiber Fair, with classes, workshops, exhibits, demonstrations, vendors, contests, prizes, and children's activities. Some of us also take part in spinning demonstrations at various other events during the year. We encourage everyone, and most especially, beginning spinners, to join us at our monthly meetings. You don't need to be a member to spin with us, you don't need to know how to spin, and you don't need to own a spinning wheel. If you wish to join the guild, there is an annual membership fee of \$20.

We have a monthly newsletter, available at

<http://www.blacksheephandspinnersguild.org>

which contains announcements of upcoming events, articles on spinning and related matters, and ads for fiber and equipment. Back issues of the newsletter, as well as announcements of upcoming meetings and events can also be found at that site.

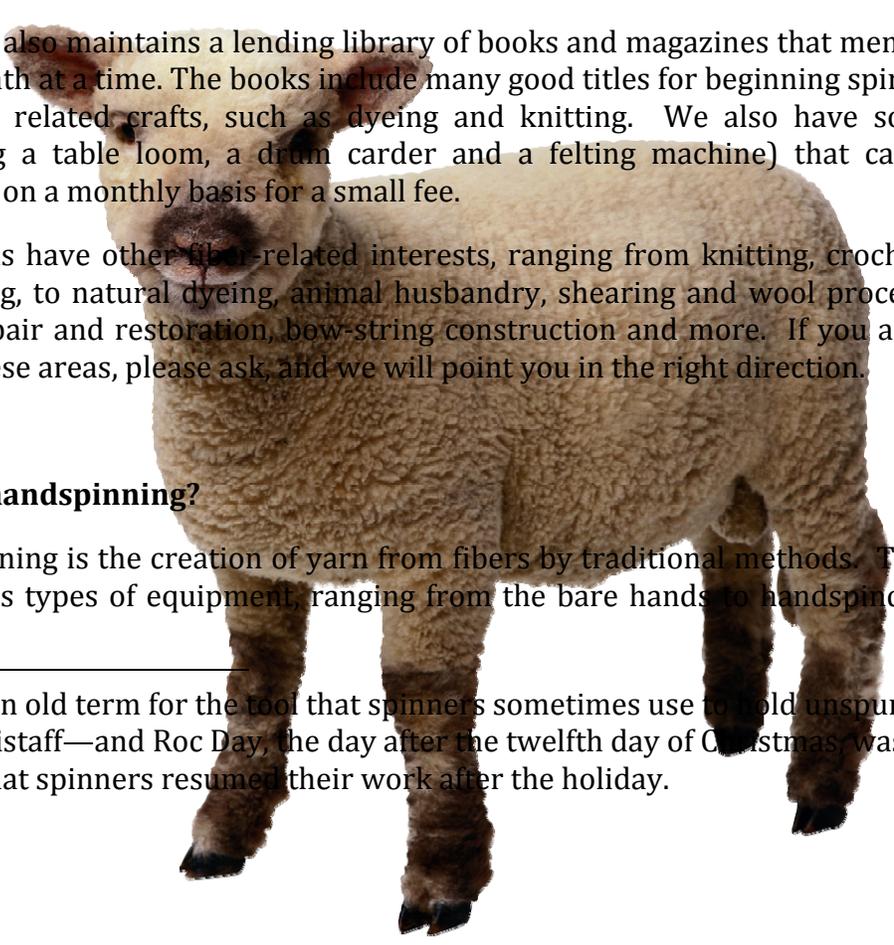
The guild also maintains a lending library of books and magazines that members can check out a month at a time. The books include many good titles for beginning spinners, as well as books on related crafts, such as dyeing and knitting. We also have some equipment (including a table loom, a drum carder and a felting machine) that can be rented to members on a monthly basis for a small fee.

Most of us have other fiber-related interests, ranging from knitting, crocheting, weaving, and felting, to natural dyeing, animal husbandry, shearing and wool processing, spinning wheel repair and restoration, bow-string construction and more. If you are interested in one of these areas, please ask, and we will point you in the right direction.

What is handspinning?

Handspinning is the creation of yarn from fibers by traditional methods. This can be done on various types of equipment, ranging from the bare hands to handspindles to spinning

* 'Roc' is an old term for the tool that spinners sometimes use to hold unspun fiber—also called a distaff—and Roc Day, the day after the twelfth day of Christmas, was traditionally the day that spinners resumed their work after the holiday.



wheels. Spinning wheels can be simple and basic or very elaborate and expensive. They come in a variety of types. You will find in our guild people who are adept at using all sorts of spinning techniques and equipment, and glad to teach you about them.

What kind of fibers are used?

Fibers for spinning fall into three main categories—animal fibers, such as wool and silk, vegetable fibers such as cotton, flax, hemp and ramie, and synthetic fibers. The first of these categories includes a number of fibers from exotic animals like alpaca, camels, golden retrievers and musk oxen. Sheep's wool is by far the most commonly used, though, and the easiest to start with. It comes in a variety of different types, varying in fineness, staple (fiber length), crimp (waviness), color, and luster. Spinners at the meetings will be glad to tell you which fiber they are spinning, and what its characteristics are.

How do I get started?

Spinning is an easy craft to master. The two fundamental skills-- controlling the thickness of the drafted fibers and controlling the twist--take some practice to develop the required coordination, but you should be off and spinning within a day or two.



If you have no equipment, the easiest, cheapest and often most satisfying way to start is with a hand spindle. The hand spindle is much like a top. It consists of a vertical spindle that adds the twist to the yarn (and also stores the finished yarn) and a horizontal whorl which functions as a flywheel to keep the spindle spinning. You can fashion one yourself, using very basic materials. For example, a CD or a tinker-toy wheel can serve as the whorl and a piece of dowel or even a willow twig as the spindle. There are members can show you how to make and spin on them. If you don't want to build your own, beautiful, handcrafted, exquisitely balanced hand spindles made of exotic woods can be bought relatively inexpensively from a number of craftspeople, including some who belong to our guild. The hand spindle gives you good practice at two-handed manipulation of the fiber (the 'worsted' method of pinching off a bit of fiber, drafting it to the desired thickness, and then releasing it so that the spin of the hand spindle can twist it together). This method is the most common one used on spinning wheels, so what you learn on a hand spindle transfers readily to the spinning wheel.

If you do not yet have a spinning wheel, you should try out a number of different configurations and brands before investing in one, and talk to experienced spinners about their respective differences, advantages and disadvantages. Most modern spinning wheels are 'flyer' wheels—one of the two main types. On flyer wheels, the two basic processes of spinning--twisting the yarn and winding it up on a bobbin-- are continuous. The flyer

assembly consists of a rotating flyer, which puts in the twist, and a rotating bobbin, which gathers the twisted yarn in. The two move at different rates, and the rate at which they rotate relative to each other determines how much the yarn is twisted before it is wound onto the bobbin. The bobbin and the flyer are made to rotate by a drive wheel, which is set in motion by foot treadles. Modern flyer wheels come in great variety of designs, and can differ considerably in the details of their operation. Spinners in the guild will be happy to explain how their wheels work, and to let you try your hand at them. (Some may even let you borrow a spare wheel to practice on.)

Less common than flyer wheels are spindle wheels. They differ in two major ways from flyer wheels. First, twisting the yarn on the tip of the spindle and winding it on to the spindle shaft are separate operations, as with the hand spindle; the operator must pause periodically to wind the twisted yarn onto the spindle shaft. Second, on most spindle wheels, the drive wheel is turned by hand, rather than with a treadle, so only one hand is left free to control the fiber. This category includes wheels ranging from tiny Indian box charka wheels that you can tuck under your arm to five foot tall 'walking wheels'. Some of us enjoy spinning on these, and would be happy to talk about them if you are interested.

Once you have decided which type of wheel you want, you can often find used ones in good condition on eBay, in local barter lists, or even at the spinning guild's periodic garage sales. Spinning wheels in antique stores should be approached with caution. They are often missing parts, and antique store owners almost never know much about them. The information they have to offer about the age and the origin of the wheel may be inaccurate. Some wheels have maker's marks that can help you determine where they were made, but many do not. Spinning requirements were different in the nineteenth century than they are now, so antique wheels are often not set up to meet the demands of modern spinners. However, if you do know what you are looking for, antique wheels in good condition can provide a rich and interesting introduction to the history of our craft. If you are a beginning spinner thinking of buying a used spinning wheel—antique or modern—you should ask an experienced spinner to check it out. If you have inherited an old wheel, there are guild members who can tell you what it will take to get it into spinning shape, and who can help you to do so. Bring your wheel to a meeting, and we will be happy to talk with you about it.

Some good books for beginning spinners:

The following recent books are helpful for beginners. There are also many others, some of which are out of print, available from the guild library.

McCuin, Judith MacKenzie. 2007. *Teach Yourself Visually: Handspinning*. Wiley.

Casey, Maggie. 2008. *Start Spinning*. Interweave Press.

Pennington, David and Michael Taylor. 2004. *A Guide to American Spinning Wheels and Accessories*. Schiffer. An invaluable reference for people interested in old wheels.