

ENHANCING THE VARIATIONS IN A COLORED FLEECE

Submitted by

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How often we find a beautiful colored fleece with lovely variations in color. The tips can be a bit sun-bleached, there can be variation in the fleece coloration, the sheep can be multicolored as with Jacob sheep. If such a fleece is carded – either by hand, drum carder or fleece processor, the results are similar - uniformly colored, prepped wool for spinning. Particularly when weaving simple weft-faced rugs of handspun natural colored wool, those color variations and bleached tips can be quite desirable as a design element.

After spinning for decades, I developed a process to gently separate locks and fluff them into a loose bundle that allows spinning directly from the bundle into a thick, unkempt rug weft. The unkempt appearance is part of the charm of treating a natural colored fleece this way.

The rugs pictured here were spun from two natural Romney fleeces purchased from a Wisconsin breeder, Carol Pine of [Yorkshire Rose Farm](#). The fleeces had a nice staple length of 5-6" (12-15cm) and were quite free of vegetal matter. I like to scour fresh low-grease fleeces like Romney in a simple overnight soak in cold water followed by a through rinse. Scouring with a cold overnight soak requires a fresh (not more than a few months after shearing) fleece from a breed that doesn't have excessive grease. Breeds suitable include Romney, Coopworth, Lincoln, Cotswold, Eider (German Whitefaced Meat Sheep), Frisian, Finn, Shetland – most of the Northern European "Land Race" sheep. Merino, Merino Cross, Rambouillet and similar have a waxy grease that makes them unsuitable.

The scouring process is fairly straightforward. Skirt the fleece, leaving it in one piece and the lock structure intact. The breeds mentioned above are usually quite robust and remain as shorn during the scouring. Place the fleece in a large tub and cover with water. If there is enough in the rain barrel, I prefer it, but tap water is also fine. In summer, the temperature of water in a rain barrel is not really cold and that is good. Submerge the fleece, move around a bit and make sure it is wetted. In a fresh fleece, there is suint or dried sweat from the sheep that has cleansing properties. When the fleece is soaked, this substance frees up the worst dust and dirt, matted tips, and cuts some of the grease. After soaking overnight or up to a full day, the fleece is rinsed until the water is light colored. The first dark brown liquor from the soak contains no soap or detergent and is suitable as fertilizer for vegetable or flower beds. Place the rinsed fleece on a drying rack out of full sun and wait until dry.

This leaves sufficient grease on the wool to make it spin nicely with minimal or no prep (carding or combing) and remove enough of the "dreck" to give it a nice hand without stickiness and a soft, sheepy fragrance. This method of scouring approximates some of my very first spinning wool, 40 years ago in Schleswig-Holstein (Germany). There, handspinners could go to the wool co-op and purchase "Rueckenwaesche" (washed on the back) which was wool from the sheep grazing the dikes (German Whitefaced Meat Sheep or "Weißkopf" with a long staple, somewhat lustrous fleece) – and those sheep had been run through tide pools a good two weeks prior to shearing. It needed no further scouring prior to spinning and was like butter in the hands. Leaving some grease in the wool makes it less prone to dryness and static and helps it cling together better when drafting. It is necessary to spin such wool in a

warm place, and many old spinning pictures have the spinner sitting near the fire. Should a novice leave too much grease in the wool, it can lead to the orifice and hooks on the wheel getting “gunky”. Dipping an ear swab in alcohol is an easy way to clean the wheel.

It is quiet and mesmerizing to gently tease the wool apart so that it still hangs together and yet will draft out to a thick yarn. There is no special technique other than separating the fibers in your hands until the desired consistency is achieved. It isn't tearing or pulling, but spreading the locks into a rough sort of cloud. This will probably differ from spinner to spinner depending on how smooth or rough the desired yarn will be. It does make spinning easier if the hand teased fiber remains in a medium to large sized piece. It aids in drafting later.

Spinning a thick yarn without a smooth surface is a perfect task for the Country Spinner. The slow speed and large orifice make the spinning process quite effortless. Yes, spinning thick yarn is not always easy once a spinner learns to do a consistent fine yarn, but with a little practice it isn't that difficult. It is important to keep a bunch of fibers in the hands and not let it become too thin during the drafting process. It is also relatively easy to control how rough or smooth the surface of the yarn becomes. An interesting effect when woven is created by leaving some of the bleached or discolored tips standing out above the yarn surface.

Since the fleeces were still partially in the grease, the yarn needed scouring prior to use. Skeins were soaked in hot water and Orvus and rinsed well. This scouring also relaxes the skeins. The yarn is now ready for weaving as is – simply wind onto a shuttle and insert in the web.

These rugs are simple, weft faced plain weave rugs at 4 working ends per inch. They were woven on an Ulla Cyrus full sized countermarche loom with considerable “oomph” to make firm rugs. Actually, any sturdy loom will work well.

The warp is a 4-ply Navajo churro wool, also a natural gray – very strong and works well with the roughly spun Romney. I do prefer a wool warp for handspun rugs. Do make sure that any wool used as warp is firmly spun and plied and has little or no give. Wool warp allows a firm beat, lays flat on the floor, and doesn't get limp when the rug is washed. This rough hewn yarn would also be suitable for wall hangings and tapestries – and spun a bit finer would make a very interesting outer garment.

Naturally, this technique of hand teasing a natural colored fleece would also be suitable for thinner or more even yarns as desired. That is the joy of handspinning – the spinner can determine the properties of the yarn and tailor them to the expected finished product.

Sara von Tresckow began spinning and weaving in the late 1970's when living in Osterroenfeld, Schleswig-Holstein, near Rendsburg where he husband was working. This is a part of South Jutland that lies behind sea dikes to protect it from the North Sea, and the dikes guarded by sturdy sheep with quite a nice fleece. With a gifted wheel from a neighbor, Sara's fiber explorations moved into a herd of Frisian milk sheep, a big Finnish loom, growing flax, and ultimately publishing a book on the how to of drawloom weaving. After 20 years in Germany, Sara and Hans returned to Wisconsin where they reside in Fond du Lac and own [The Woolgatherers Ltd., LLC](#), a brick and mortar fiber shop featuring Ashford products, Swedish looms from Öxabäck, and imported linen yarn.



Sample skeins of grey and dark fleeces displaying a typical lock.



Teasing the scoured fleece prior to spinning.



Yarn winding on the bobbin of the Country Spinner 2.



Dark rug on the loom.



Dark rug completed.



Light rug completed.