

Shearing:

This isn't a shearing class, but if you want to either use your wool for hand spinning or market it to others for that purpose, you should make sure your shearer understands your goals. Some shearers are all about speed, and just getting the wool off. You want someone who is going to preserve the quality of the wool while it's being removed.

Skirting: Remove any kemp and/or hairy fiber, dung tags, matted wool, second cuts, wool less than 1.5 in length (you're probably not going to want to spin anything shorter than that).

Sorting: Sort the remainder into categories (good, better, best). You will probably want to use these different grades of wool for different things.

Washing: You have options!

- Cold Water bath. Effective at releasing dirt. Will not remove lanolin. Much like leaving wool out to be washed by rainwater. If a fleece is really dirty, this is sometimes a good pre-wash.
- Fermented Suint Bath: same cold water bath used over many times. Fermented suint substance from the wool in previous baths takes on detergent-like role in degreasing and cleaning fiber.
- Hot Water (loose, in bags, or layered)

I wash my fleece loose in hot water on the stovetop (in a pot dedicated to that purpose).

Some people are very particular about maintaining the lock structure of the fleece, and will meticulously strip apart locks and layer them for washing in place. Somewhere in the middle are people who put fleece in lingerie bags for washing to prevent the wool from getting too jumbled up. It's all a matter of personal preference. And perhaps partly an issue of how much you're paying for your fleece?

Kinds of cleansers: dishwashing soap (nothing with bleach or antibacterial agents, though), wool wash, Orvis paste? I use a generic dishwashing soap. There are a lot of specialty products out there for washing wool, but they can be significantly more expensive. Never use anything with bleach in it on wool. Bleach will DISSOLVE wool. Truly.

Temp of water: 120-140? I used to do 140, but found that 120-ish works just as well for most fleeces. May need to go hotter for fine fleeces, or very sticky lanolin.

Submerge wool. No agitation. Swooshing around a smidge to ensure water penetration is ok.

Soak for 20-40 minutes, pour off wash water, rinse in progressively cooler water until rinse water runs clear (or almost clear). No dramatic temperature changes (may cause felting).

I usually drain off the wash water outside into a rocky area that used to be a fire pit.

You do not want to send a bunch of lanolin into your septic system. While you might not wash enough fleece for this to ever become an issue, a large amount of lanolin re-solidifying in your plumbing and or septic tank might be a real problem. Most of your dirt and grease is going to come out in the wash water. Water from subsequent rinses probably won't hurt anything

Most fleeces will require a couple of rinses, but most will come clean with one wash. You might need to repeat if fleece is very greasy (or your water wasn't hot enough).

Drying: Spin as much water out first (washing machine works well), then dry in indirect sun (if you can find it this time of year!). Do not handle too much while wet, as fibers are more easily broken. An old window screen works well to provide good airflow for faster drying.

Picking: opening locks, either manually (simply teasing locks apart) or by machine (big scary thing with spikes that swings back and forth). This will release some VM. Mechanical picking may damage finer fibers, though.

Carding: Carding is best for short to medium length fibers and is specifically called for in prepping fiber for "woolen" spinning. Carders separate and align fibers, but do not screen out second cuts or VM.

- **Hand carders:** pretty easy to come by. Cost about \$70 new. Time and labor intensive way to prepare wool, but creates lovely little rolags that are very nice to spin. And is kind of relaxing to do in front of the TV on a winter evening. Or maybe you could train up the kiddos?
- **Flick Carder:** Cheaper (\$35-\$40 new), for preparing one lock at a time. Can be slow, but a great way to ensure that short bits and weak tips are removed prior to spinning.
- **Drum Carder:** Larger, more expensive tool (new drum carders are \$400+). Can be hand-cranked or motor driven. Can process more wool, more quickly. Also great for blending fibers. However, will not remove VM. If anything, it will blend it in more thoroughly.
- **Budget option-** Dog brush (slicker style) Works just like a flick carder. An easy, low-cost way to get a feel for prepping wool. Just grab one lock at a time, hold one end and comb out the other, then flip and do the other end.

Combing: Combing is the ideal way to process longer fibers, and is also great for dehairing double coated fleeces (llama, Icelandic sheep, some Shetlands). Results in a very clean, smoothly aligned fiber for spinning, free of any problematic short bits, VM. I've found that fiber must be a minimum of about 3 in long to be comb-able. Note: There can sometimes be quite a bit of waste. You may find that some of this combing waste is perfectly usable once carded.

- **English Combs:** Big, scary looking combs with many rows of sharp metal tines. Can be quite heavy. Potential for personal injury, fairly high. "Don't drink and comb."
- **Viking combs:** handheld, with two rows of curved tines. Not quite as threatening looking. Can be used one against the other (one in each hand), or with one mounted on a base (fastened to a table or some other object).
- **Mini combs:** significantly smaller and lighter than English combs. Designed for hand use with small amounts of fiber.
- **Budget option:** Make your own? some tutorials online.

Other misc tools:

Diz, for pulling combed fiber off in a nice, continuous stream. Any concave object with a hole in the center will do. The size of the hole will determine the diameter of your stream of fiber.

Doffer, for removing batt from drum carder.

Selecting a Hand Spinning Fleece

There are a number of things to look for (and lookout for) when selecting a fleece to spin.

Some are objective, some are subjective, and others depend upon what you're planning or hoping to do with it!

Characteristic	Description	Cause	Ruling
Second Cuts	short bits	from second pass with shears.	Causes nepps, shortens overall staple. You'll want to pick them out during skirting if poss.
"Scurf"	sheep dandruff. Most visible on dark fleeces, near butt end of locks	cause uncertain. Health, nutritional issues, stress?	Does not wash out! (may comb out, though)
"Tenderness"	General weakness in staple over the whole fleece	Health issues, stress, poor nutrition	Not worth your time. Will only end in frustration.
Break in fleece	Literally a break in the staple at the same place throughout fleece.	Caused by stress, illness, poor nutrition	Depending on where the break is in the staple, it might make the fleece unusable. At the very least, if is going to require significantly more work for less end product.
Kemp	hard, opaque white fibers usually found in britch area (if at all).	Common to some breeds	Can be skirted out if only in parts of fleece.
"Cotting"	Fleece matted or felted		Should be skirted out. Not spinnable.
"Fleece Rot"	Discolorations (pink, green, blue) of wool, sometimes sticky excretions.	there are a number of bacterial infections which can affect fleece	You really don't want to deal with any of them!
Black Fungus Tip	Black, tar-like substance at tips of locks	Fungus	No, thanks.
Dirt, tags etc,	Dangling dirty, poopy locks around the edge of fleece	Fleece not skirted properly	adds a lot of weight, means more work for you, less yield overall
Yolk	yellow color which does wash out.	Natural excretions from sheep's skin	No big deal
Canary Stain	yellow color that will not wash out.		Permanent yellowy cast on fiber. Not a big deal if you are going to dye the wool.
"the Rise"	Partial break near the butt end of locks	in primitive breeds that shed, it is a natural break in fleece	If sheared below the rise, short bits can separate in carding and cause nepps (little fuzz balls that make yarn lumpy)
Greasiness	Fresh fleece will be oily, not sticky.	Lanolin, suint (Most finewools will be greasier than "medium wools" or "primitives")	Not a bad thing, unless is hard or gummy. (Been sitting around a long time) Greasier fleeces take more washing, at higher temps.
Length	Average, min, and max lengths of individual locks	Varies widely by breed, and individual animal, # months growth,,,	need depends on preferred method of processing (< 3" for carding, >3" for combing)

Luster	Reflectiveness of the surface of the fibers	Longwools are generally lustrous, finewools are not. Breed characteristic.	Crimp and luster are inversely proportional
Crimp	Number of waves per inch.	Breed characteristic	Lots of crimp means springiness, resiliency
Fineness	actual diameter of individual fibers (micron testing, spinning count)	Breed characteristic	Finer wools can be spun thinner. Suitable for lighter weight yarns.
“Hand”	Softness to the touch. More of a surface texture thing than fineness.	Genetics, age, etc, etc	Very subjective criteria
Density	Wool fibers per square inch of sheep!	Genetics, age, etc, etc.	Dense locks will have a tendency to let less VM in. Will stay organized better in washing.
Open/Closed Locks?	Locks clearly defined and tapered (closed), or not (open)?	Breed characteristic	Closed locks are easier to organize for combing, flick carding and will hold together better in washing. For drum carding, it doesn't matter.
Sunbleaching	Tips visibly lighter than rest of (colored) fleece, or dingy and yellowed.	Exposure to elements, natural weathering.	May make tips weak, prone to breakage. Or it might just add nice highlights to your yarn.
Vegetable Matter (VM, veg)	Hay, seeds, straw, burrs, small branches, sawdust, etc	Management issues- method of feeding, pasture maintenance	Some will come out easily (straw), others not so much (burrs, sawdust). Proceed with caution!
Total Weight	Weight of fleece in pounds	varies widely by breed, and depends some upon how heavily it has been skirted	only really matters if you need a certain amount of finished yarn
Consistency of fleece overall	Do locks pulled from different sections of fleece look very different in length? Texture? Color?	breeding	only really matters if you need a lot of the same end product. Sometimes variety is a good thing-
Color	Browns, grays, black, taupe, silver, spotted!	Breed characteristics, selective breeding	Personal taste, intended use?
Smells	Nice, fresh, healthy, sheepy smell. Urine odor Musky smell Mildew-y smells	Lanolin, suint, hay, etc Sheep wet itself during shearing Ram fleece May indicate that fleece was shorn and put away wet.	No problem Will wash out Might require more washing Depending on how long it was in storage, fiber might be compromised.

Things to Remember:

“Bargain Fleece” is not always a bargain. (In fact, it is usually not- but might be good to practice on?)

It is always best to see a fleece in person before buying it.

Once you've screened the goods for “soundness”, selecting a fleece is mostly about personal preference, and intended use!