

Assessing a Fleece ***or Is Free Fleece a Bargain??*** ***by Elizabeth Lovick***

More and more spinners are realising the satisfaction of sourcing raw fleece. You can choose the breed you want and you can process it the way you want. If they know you are a spinner, farmers will often offer you free fleece. This is hard to refuse, but it might not be much good for hand spinning!

So what are the things you need to think about before buying, and what should you look for when buying? It can be very disappointing to come home with armfuls of fleece which on closer inspection is only good for mulching the roses...

Before Setting Out

In the UK we have a huge variety of different breeds. All have different characteristics – the thickness of each fibre, the length and crimp of the fibres – and a fleece which is good for rugs will not be good for underwear! If you have a specific project in mind you need to source fleece which is suitable for that project. The longest and shortest stapled fleeces are not the easiest to handle, and if you are a beginner, they should probably be avoided. Similarly, very fine and very coarse fleece need special handling and might be better left until next year.

You need to be realistic. Fleeces take up space in storage and when spinning. How much space do you have? And how much spinning do you usually do in a year? Remember that fleece is nicest to spin when it is fresh, and there will always be more next year.

Things to Think About before Leaving Home

- What is the fleece for?
- How experienced am I?
- How much spinning will I REALLY do this year?
- How much fleece can I store?
- What am I prepared to spend?

When You Get There

When you go to buy a fleece it will either be on the sheep or bundled up into a tight ball. Trying your hand as shearing is always fun and seeing the fleece on the sheep gives you an excellent idea of what it is like.

After shearing, fleeces are rolled up, cut side out (except for Shetland fleece where the tips are out so that the colour can be seen). The sides are folded over and the fleece rolled from the tail end. The neck is then used to put round the bundle and hold it together.

ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS UNROLL ANY FLEECE YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN. The neck is the best part of the fleece, and nice neck wool does not mean the rest of the fleece is as good. If the fleece was



packed wet, for example, all sorts of nasties may have taken up residence. Opening the fleece also gives you a chance to see how 'well' it has been skirted. All fleeces should have had the very poo-y bits (the dags) under the tail removed, but a lightly skirted fleece will have had the tail removed and a well skirted fleece will have had most of the britch removed as well.

Choosing Your Fleece

Not every fleece, however beautiful the colour, is suitable for hand spinning. There may be occasions when you will put up with a less-than-perfect fleece, but you need to know what you are letting yourself in for!!

First Things First

1. You must like the fleece.

You are going to spend hours with this fibre and maybe years with the finished garment. There is no point buying the perfect fleece if you don't like it.

2. It must be 'fit for purpose'.

If you want to make a rug there is no point buying a fleece made up of short, soft fibre. Similarly, a harsh fibre will not make underwear.

Secondary Considerations

1. The fleece should not be matted.

If the fleece is matted it will almost certainly be felted – in other words the fibre will be stuck together for good and all. You may be able to pull some mats apart, but it will be a long and frustrating job.

2. There shouldn't be too much vegetable matter in the fleece.

This could be straw, hay, heather, peat, sand etc. You can pick stalks out, and peat and sand will come out with washing, but you need to consider whether the fleece is worth the effort.

3. The fleece shouldn't be too greasy or yolky.

Some grease is fine, but if there is too much then you will need to wash the fleece before you spin it. Again, you will know whether the fleece is worth the effort.

Staple length, thickness and Crimp

Different breeds have different staple (or fibre) lengths and thicknesses. The length is measured in inches or cms, with a staple length of about 4 ins being the easiest to deal with, and the thickness in microns (1 micron is 0.001 mm) or by the Bradford Count. With microns, the **smaller** the number the finer the fibre; with Bradford, the **larger** the number the finer the fibre. Crimp is the waviness of the fibre and is measured in crimps per inch.

Modern breeds will usually have a uniform staple over the whole animal and the whole herd, but the more primitive breeds will show much more variation, both within a herd and on a single animal.

Assessing the Wool Quality

If you are looking at a fleece, put the tight ball on the ground somewhere clean, or on a sheet if inside. Work out where the neck wool has been used to 'tie' the bundle together, remove it and **unroll the fleece**. The head end will be towards you and the tail furthest away. The sides will be folded in. Open these out.

If the fleece now looks like a **sheepskin rug**, forget it!! As you pick up the head end, the fleece should open up and hang 'like a lace curtain'. In other words, there should be holes in it and fibres holding the bits together. Now gently pull bits of the fleece apart. A good fleece will separate with fibres clinging together.



At this point look for two faults – second cuts and cutting after the rise.

Second cuts are a shearing fault, where the shearer hasn't got close enough to the skin with the first pass of the shears, and so cuts again. You get short bits of fibre which are a nuisance when spinning, and can cause the yarn to pill.

'**The rise**' is the time when the wool is ready to be sheared. The fibres have a weak point here, and will tend to break when spinning. You can usually see the rise as the fibre after the rise tends to be a different colour.



Sometimes you get a fleece which seems to be matted at first sight, but when you start to pull it apart you find that the fibres do part easily. This is particularly true of greasy fleeces with fine fibres. This is different from mats which have felted; these will not pull apart.



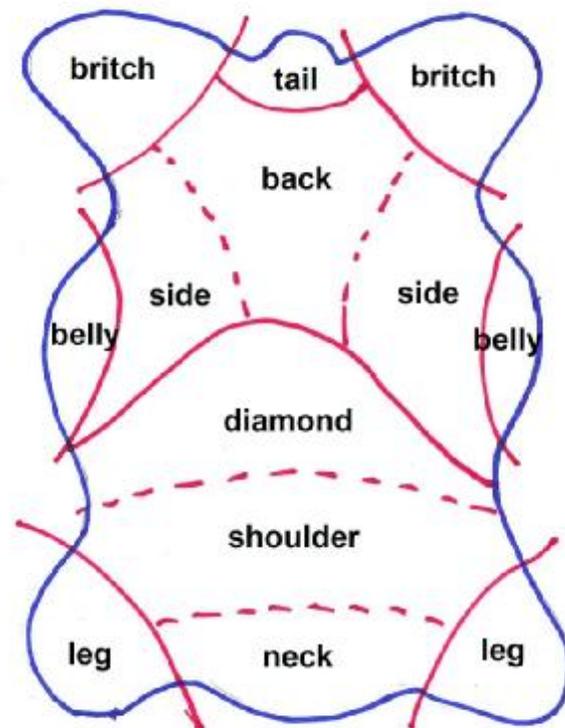
You now need to examine **the tips** of the staple. These will probably be grouped together in locks, but the real question is how easily the tips can be pulled apart. If the tips separate easily then spinning will be easy. If they have to be forced apart, then more preparation will be needed. Look, too, at the colour of the tips compared to the rest of the fleece. If they are bleached or stained this will show in your yarn. They may also be brittle, and therefore break when spinning. Lighter tips need not be a fault, and if they are not brittle, can give a very pretty effect when spun.

If you are still interested in the fleece, you now need to take a lock and **snap it** to test its strength. Take a small lock, and hold the cut end in one hand and the tips in the other. Pull your hands apart quickly and listen for the sound made. Good, strong fibres will 'ping'. Weak fibres will crackle, and very weak fibres will break. Then finger-spin some of the fibres to see how they behave with twist between them. This will also show up any kemp (rogue fibres which do not take dye and cause scratchiness) and give you an idea of how greasy or dry the fibre feels in the hands.

Sorting a Fleece

Not all areas of a fleece are of the same quality. The amount of variation depends both on the breed and on the living conditions in which the fleece was grown. For example, sheep kept in doors will not have rain or sun damage to the fleece on the back, but those living out in all weathers may well have damaged or coarser fibres on the back. As the fleece quality is dependent on both genetics and the environment (temperature, feeding) animals kept indoors tend to have coarser fleece than the same animal kept out in cold conditions.

When a sheep is sheared, the fleece is cut along the centre of its belly, and then down each leg. In theory, the finest wool is found round the neck and on the shoulder. In practice, many sheep spend half their lives with their heads through the squares in the shire wire round their fields. This means that this wool is often rubbed off or, at best, matted. The coarsest wool is the britch wool on the back legs. The back may be coarse and damaged too. This means that in practise the wool that is easiest to use is from the sides, the diamond and the shoulders.



What should you expect to pay for fleece?

This is a 'piece of string' question and has no definite answer. I have been given beautiful fleece for nothing, and I have happily paid £20 for the neck and shoulders of two small animals totalling less than 500g. Some people charge by weight and others by the fleece – remember the weight of one fleece may be anything from 800 g for a small breed like the North Ronaldsay or Shetland etc to 8 kg for a big commercial breed. Most people charge something in the region of £5 to £8 per kilo for top class fleece for hand spinning.

Remember that the farmer has spent **a lot of time and energy** growing the fleece, and I think it is **only fair** to pay him accordingly. The result of this is that local farmers will keep their very best fleeces for me to have first refusal.

A word about Ebay. If you know the seller and have no other way of accessing fleece this may work for you. But the majority of people selling fleece on Ebay only show a rolled up ball of fleece. Any seller who **knows what hand spinners are looking for** will have a pic which shows the lace curtain effect and another showing the cut side to show whether there are seconds cuts and whether the fleece was cut before the rise.

When you get it home

You have taken time and trouble to acquire your fleece, so take care of it when you get home. Keep it in an unheated garage or shed, the colder the better. It may well have come in a 'carrot bag' (the mesh sacks used for veg) or a woven polyester sack. Both are excellent for long term storage as they let the air into the fleece. The woven sacks have the advantage that they keep mice out. (Most farmers storing fleece use the large ones.) Label each fleece with the breed, where it was bought and when (including the year!).



Fresh fleece is easiest to spin when it is just that – fresh. Aim to use your fleece within the year. Yes, they will keep a lot longer than that, especially if kept cold, but you may well need to wash the fibres before you spin them, as the greasy goes rancid, becoming very smelly and sticky.



When coming to use a fleece, take it in to the house a couple of hours before you plan to spin to let it warm up so that the grease softens. Some folk break the fleece up into the different qualities and store them in different bags. Others keep the fleece intact, taking handfuls of the fibre they want as they work. There is no right and wrong. If you are keeping a fleece intact, spread a sheet on the floor, and unroll the fleece on to it. When you want to put it away, fold the fleece and sheet together and roll it up. This makes it both easy to store and easy to see what fibre is left and from where.

Further Info

Google is your friend. www.answers.com/topic/wool is a good starting point and gives many links. The Coloured Sheep Breeders site has lots of info, as does www.sheepcentre.co.uk.

British Sheep and Their Wool published by the Wool Marketing Board gives a good photo of each breed along with the technical details of the fleece. But the book all fleece spinners need is the book on sheep breeds from around the world is [The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook by Deborah Robson](#), due to be published in the Spring. This has not only a photo and details of the sheep, but photos of a lock of the fleece, a spun skein, and a knitted and woven sample. The pocket edition is [The Field Guide to Fleece](#) - take it with you to fibre events!

If you are a member of a Guild, or just know other spinners, why not get together and acquire several fleeces of different sorts, then assess them together? There is nothing like the hands-on experience of several fleeces, good and bad, soft and harsh, short and long, to give you an idea exactly what you want to spin in the future.



And remember, the survival of many of the non-commercial breeds depends on us as hand spinners wanting variety and being prepared to pay an economic price for the fleece we value.



What to do with rubbish fleece

- use it as a garden mulch to protect plants in winter
- put it on the compost heap – it gives off heat when it breaks down and acts as an accelerator
- if it is not too dirty, wash it and use it for stuffing cushions and soft toys
- use it to lag your pipes (and insulate your roof if your insurance allows)