

Fleece Preparation

Because sheep are genetically diverse animals, there will be exceptions to the rule on just about everything stated in this handout! Thus, it is always important to do a small felt sample with every new fleece to determine it's felting properties and shrinkage prior to using it in a larger project! Selecting raw fleece of good quality takes a little knowledge. See my handout that specifically addresses buying raw fleece.

When wool is sheared from the sheep it requires several preparation steps prior to felting.

Sorting: The fleece will vary in quality and appearance on different areas of the sheep. Certain areas may also contain vegetable matter (hay, weeds) or excessive dirt, making it desirable to remove those areas and wash separately.

Washing: The fleece is washed to remove dirt, wool grease (lanolin) and, to a smaller degree, vegetable matter. I have attached one of many methods for washing fleece.

I should note that a few individuals do felt with unwashed fleece from certain breeds. It is also fine to lay out the washed locks and felt them without any of the following preparation steps. Generally, the more combed out the fleece is, the easier it will be to work with and the felt will be smoother and more even.

Hand Processing Methods

1. Teased out with the fingers.
2. Hand carded into rolags with hand held carders.
3. Drum carded into batts with a hand cranked or motorized carding drum.

Commercial Processing Method

1. Batts prepared on large drum carders.
2. Roving – A continuous strand of carded or combed fiber that has been further extended and slightly twisted into a long strip.
3. Top – The same as roving except that it is combed in a manner that selects fiber of uniform length and combs out small fibers. Usually looks denser and smoother than roving.

There are numerous breeds of sheep with greatly diverse fiber characteristics and any breed can be prepared by any of the above methods. However, since top creates a lot of waste fiber and is labor intensive it is usually only prepared from fine wool or expensive exotic fibers. That is also generally true of Superwash® fiber. Since Superwash® is an expensive process it is generally only done with fine wools. You need to know what Superwash® is and that Superwash® fibers absolutely DO NOT felt!! Superwash® is a term used to describe wool fiber that has been either chemically stripped of its scales or has been coated so that the scales lay flat. Without exposed scales along the length of the fiber it cannot felt. This is how SmartWool® and other washable wool clothing are made. It is washable because it is unable to felt and thus, unshrinkable!