

## Selecting a Raw Fleece

When visiting fiber festivals it is easy to become overwhelmed by the volume and diversity of fleeces available which makes it difficult to remember what to look for when selecting a fleece. My solution is to keep a checklist in my pocket and run through it *before* I pull out my wallet.

First, I should mention the proper etiquette in examining fleeces since many people will be handling them. Each fleece will usually be in an opened bag and bundled with twine. The sheared edge of the fleece will be exposed. This sheared edge (near the skin) gives a good indication of color, lanolin, luster, crimp, and handle. What it doesn't expose well is how much foreign matter is present and how well it is skirted (bad wool removed). There will always be some outer tips of the locks exposed for evaluation also. DO NOT pull locks from the fleece to examine them. Fleece evaluation can be done by gently parting the fleece and handling the lock "in place".

Bargains are great but paying top dollar for a well raised and nicely cared for fleece will keep the good wool producers in business which is in your best interest! Also, before you head to the festival see if you can get what you want from local producers and support your home town economy!

**Color** - Examine the locks/staples the entire length. How much of the color is from dirt? Are the tips sunburned or stained a different color? What color will it be when it is all blended. Is it the same color throughout or are you going to sort it by color? Are you going to dye it?

**Lanolin** - The amount of lanolin is easily felt by hand. The lanolin of some breeds (Merino, Corriedale) is thick/greasy and hard to wash out but worth it if you like the fleece. Other breeds have less lanolin or the lanolin is light/oily and easier to remove.

**Luster** - Definitely a personal preference issue. This is sometimes difficult to determine if the fleece has a great deal of lanolin since it will also shine. It helps here to know the characteristics of the breed from which the wool came. Also, look towards the tips which may have less lanolin than the cut end.

**Foreign Matter** - This could be excess dirt which you may not want to wash out or affects the weight significantly. Or vegetable matter such as hay, seeds, burrs, etc. that are difficult and time consuming (sometimes impossible) to remove. Both of these will be more evident on the tip end of the locks so try to find some areas where they are exposed or gently reach into the fleece and feel for it. Also, check for skin flakes from dermatitis (they do not wash out well at all) and for any evidence of insect infestation (wool damage/eggs/bug carcasses). Both of these will be more likely at the sheared side of the fleece. Also, how many short cuts are evident from the shearing? Use your sense of smell too. There should not be any putrid or mildew smells coming from the fleece. Mildew smells are very difficult to wash out.

**Stress Breaks** - These occur when the animal is stressed in some way for a period of time during the growth of the fleece. It could be due to illness, lactation, nutritional issues, or severe changes in the environment. Press a lock between your fingers and feel for thin spots as you run your fingers down it. You may also do a snap test by holding the lock at each end and giving it a little jerk. I also look for tips that pull off easily from dryness, sunburn, etc.

**Tips** - Are the tips of the locks in good shape? This is the part of the fleece that protected the sheep from the rain, was rubbed along the fences etc. Look for cotting (felting on the sheep), brittleness, sunburn, etc. The tips will always show some wear and tear (even if the animal was coated) but cotted fleece is a really difficult and usually impossible to work with. Note that some fleeces have very wavy loose tips and some are even and compact (blocky staples). This is dependent on breed characteristics and a personal preference choice.

**Handle (softness), fineness, length, and crimp** - All of these are personal preference points. One of these characteristics (such as a neat crimp) may draw you to the fleece but be sure to look at fleece with all of these other features in mind too! Also note how uniform these characteristics are throughout the fleece. The nicest wool is usually at the shoulders and it is typical for lower hips to have lower quality wool but many breeder's strive for as much uniformity as possible.

**Representative of the breed** - I have found some great fleeces that don't fall into the specifications of the breed at all. That's not a problem unless you plan on buying, for example, a Corriedale fleece for the specific purpose of seeing what Corriedale is like to spin or felt. Lastly, is this fleece from a double coated breed in which the two different fibers within the fleece must be separated? Consider the additional time required to prepare that fleece.