

Types of Fleece

Wool can be very coarse (strong) or extremely fine depending on the genetic selection for that breed. Below is a table that gives three methods of wool grading and some examples of sheep that fall into each category. While this grading system does not give any indication of the felting ability of the fleece, it will indicate what purpose it might be best for (rugs, clothing, etc.) and this terminology will often arise when purchasing fiber. I find that most wool vendors use the spinning count or micron grading system.

American	Spinning Count	Micron	
Fine	<80's	under 17.70	Fine wool for felt clothing, scarves, hats & outerwear. Not as durable for rugs, etc. Breeds: Merino, Rambouillet, Cormo, Corriedale and Finnish Landrace
Fine	80's	17.70-19.14	
Fine	70's	20.60-22.04	
1/2	64's	22.05-23.49	
1/2	62's	23.50-24.94	Medium wool good for same purposes as fine wool with the course of this grade best used for outerwear and hats. Breeds: Corriedale, Finnish Landrace Icelandic and Shetland (both dual coated) some Romney.
3/8	60's	24.95-26.39	
3/8	58's	26.40-27.84	
3/8	56's	27.85-29.29	
1/4	54's	27.85-29.29	
1/4	50's	29.30-30.99	
low 1/4	48's	31.00-32.69	
low 1/4	46's	32.70-34.39	Coarse wool good for rugs, outerwear, socks, and hats. Breeds: Coopworth, Cotswold, Border Leicester, Romney, Lincoln, Karakul
common	44's	34.40-36.19	
common	40's	36.20-38.09	
common	36's	38.10-40.20	
common	>36'	over 40.20	

The Merino wool I distribute is about 22 um and felts quickly. There are over 60 available colors. The Norwegian Felting Batts are medium/coarse and a blend of Pelssau and C1 (Norwegian Wools). This wool is "Gotland" type, high luster, fast felting and excellent for outerwear, rugs and sculptural felt. It also blends well with Merino and other wools. Over-dyed in 20 colors and mothproofed using a non-toxic process.

There are also double coated breeds such as Shetland, Icelandic and Llamas that have a soft inner coat and longer, coarse, guard hairs. Typically, the guard hairs are removed from the fleece. If you buy raw fleece it must be removed by hand. Top is usually available in these breeds that will have the guard hairs removed but look closely to see that they are all out!

The breeds that are considered "rare" or sometimes called "ancient", will generally have more fleece to fleece variability since there has been less genetic selection. Some of these breeds would be the Karakul, Gotland, Icelandic, Shetland and Jacob. Felting ability is variable however most felt quite well.

I should also note that the sheep breeds raised for meat rather than wool as a general rule do not have good felting fiber. Some of these breeds would be Dorset, Suffolk, Columbia and Hampshire.

It should also be noted that the grades in the table above have been divided into fine, medium, and coarse (strong). The wool may also be described as short, medium, or long in length of staple (locks). Fine wools are generally the softest but there are medium wools that are long and feel quite silky. Lamb fleece (from its first shearing) is usually a little finer and shorter than the adult and there are always animals in each breed that don't possess the typical characteristics.