

Washing Raw Sheep Fleece

Raw sheep fleece is the fleece that has been sheared from the sheep. The animal producer/farmer will usually skirt the fleece before selling it. Skirting means to remove any wool locks that are really dirty, matted, or would otherwise devalue the fleece.

After skirting it is usually placed in a bag or rolled/folded and tied with twine. Raw fleece is usually sold by the pound and fleeces generally range between 4 – 8 lbs but can be 12+ lbs depending on the breed and how well it was skirted.

Remember that you are buying raw fleece and that a certain amount of its weight is dirt and sheep grease (lanolin) that will be washed out. It is always good to weigh the clean dry fleece to determine it's true yield and final cost per pound.

Begin by opening up the fleece and spreading it out on a clean surface. Try to do this without pulling the locks away from one another and see if you can lay it out flat (in the shape of a bear skin) and tell which part is the shoulder, hip, and back. The back usually has the most open and loose locks with more sun exposed tips and it is also where you will typically find the most vegetable matter since sheep tend to throw hay onto each other's backs. Farmer's producing wool for spinners and felter's will use management principles that help decrease the amount of hay and dirt that gets into the fleece. The shoulder is usually the best quality and should have the nicest crimp (waviness). The breech (butt and hip) will have the most manure and dirt and sometimes less crimp and lower quality wool.

Do your own skirting if necessary and remove any areas that look as if they should be cleaned separately from the rest of the fleece.

Use thick rubber gloves when the water is too hot to comfortably work in or if you have cuts on your hands. Keep in mind that the wool has been in the barnyard. It is advised that you keep your tetanus shot up to date.

1. Fill 5 gallon buckets with hot water (>120°F) and add a squirt of Dawn dish soap (best brand). It will take 3 – 5 buckets to do an entire fleece.
2. Pull the fleece gently apart by the handful, divide it among the buckets, and submerge it entirely.
3. Let the wool soak 30 minutes to 1 hour. Do not let it soak too long or the water will begin to cool and the lanolin will settle back on to the fiber.
4. Pour each bucket of wool through a large colander to remove the hot water from the wool.
5. Refill the buckets with hot water and soap while the wool drains in the colander.
6. Gently squeeze handfuls of the wet wool to express out as much dirty water as possible and place it in the new wash water. Do NOT wring or agitate the fiber or "cold shock" it by rinsing in very cold or very hot water. This will cause it to felt together and make it difficult to card or comb later.
7. Repeat steps 3 – 6 again but place the fleece back into hot or warm water without soap.
8. Repeat step 7 once again or fill the washing machine with hot water, add the fleece, let it soak briefly, and spin out the water. AGAIN, DO NOT AGITATE OR USE ANY WASH CYCLES. The benefit to the washing machine is that all of the excess water is expressed out during the spin cycle and the fleece dries faster. If the washing machine is not used, blot the excess water out of the fleece by rolling and pressing it in towels.
9. Spread the wool out to dry in a clean, safe place. It will dry faster with a slight breeze or in the sun. Once completely dry store in a plastic tub or box.