



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Volume 5, Number 1 Winter 2001 Article #2
Editor, Kathy Hayes

Notes from Judith Mackenzie's Class on Spinning Icelandic Fibers

Susan Mongold

Weaving makes the lightest fabrics. Using a brush like a scrub brush on the woven fabric after it is woven (or knitted), will produce a long fur-type nap. The tog makes very attractive rug warp.

Icelandic locks can actually be separated into up to 5 different lengths and diameters. Each layer gets progressively finer as the length gets shorter. The last or finest coat (thel) is like cashmere.

The shortest undercoat, or bottom coat, the down, makes a perfect lace yarn.

Lace is best made from a 2-ply yarn as the undulated surface of the 2-ply yarn helps to lock or hold the stitch in place. A rounder, smoother 3-ply yarn has a smoother and more slippery surface and will not hold the pattern as well.

In order to have the fibers slip easily in the spinning process, spin from the tip end of a lock, then ply from the butt end and knit from the tip end. This will give the easiest spinning experience as you are taking advantage of the lay of the scales on the wool fibers.

The most important thing in a spinning fiber is the "hand." hand is the soft silky feel of the fiber to your hand or how it feels when you handle it. It has little bearing on the fiber diameter. Even a very fine fiber can have a rough hand, while a coarse fiber can have a nice hand. But usually the finer the fiber, the better the hand.

Icelandic fleeces are not supposed to be uniform all over the body. It is expected to be shorter on the back and neck, longer on the britch and sides. Not only are the fibers of different lengths on different parts of the body, but also the fiber varies greatly on different parts of the body. The back has shorter springier wool while the sides may have longer, more thel rich locks. Primitive breeds are expected to have 7 or 8 different grades (fiber diameter) of fleece. When selecting fiber for spinning yarn for a project, take the 2 types that are the closest from the fleece to spin for the project for a uniform yarn.

If you don't separate the coats before spinning, the long fibers will stay in the middle of the yarn, the short fibers will spin to the outside.

If there is more than 3% variation in the fiber diameter, the comfort zone and "hand" is effected. the more variation, the more the garment will feel uncomfortable or be scratchy.

To spin lofty singles or a lopi-style yarn, first spin a tight even singles from well prepared wool. It helps if the roving is pre-drafted before spinning. That means making a long roving that is thinned to the diameter or amount of fibers that will be in the yarn. Then re-spin in the opposite direction to unwind (somewhat) the twist. The second "untwisting" spin is done very quickly by running the yarn through

your wheel very fast. this will give you a very even light lofty Lopi singles yarn.

Worsted vs. woolen yarns:

Worsted yarn is spun so that all of the fibers are combed straight and side-by-side evenly and spun in this configuration. This makes a strong straight long wearing and smooth yarn. This yarn is not as warm as it doesn't have as much air space incorporated in it. Worsted yarn contains about 75% air.

A woolen yarn is spun with the fibers lying sideways or any which way, which incorporates lots of air spaces and is a fluffy wooly looking yarn. It is not as strong but is warmer as it incorporates about 90% air.

How do you know what kind of yarn you need to spin for different kinds of projects?

If you want movement in your stitch or fabric, use worsted yarn. If you want to do cabled knitting, use worsted, as it will show the pattern better. If you want to knit a traditional Norwegian sweater or socks, use a worsted yarn. Use woolen spun yarns for Icelandic type sweaters and blankets. To spin worsted, prepare the fiber on mini-combs. A good type comb is the double mini-comb from Andrew Forsyth in Canada. See www.combs.com

These types of combs prepare the fiber perfectly for spinning worsted. The fiber can be spun right off of the combs easily. Or you can pull a roving from the combs after combing and then spin.

To keep down the static electricity, spray your fiber with a mist of water. If you add 1/3 baby oil (by volume) with 2/3 water in the bottle, it will make a mix that will help to keep the fiber tamed for easier spinning. Spray this mixture frugally on the fiber before spinning. Be sure to wash the yarn after spinning to wash out the oil or else it will get rancid.

Woolen yarns are easiest spun from fibers that are 2 1/2 inches or shorter. Long locks can be cut in half to shorten the fiber for woolen spinning. The object of woolen spinning is to try and get the most crosses of the fiber. Do this by scrubbing the fibers on your hand combs every which way. Make a rolag rolling the rolag as lightly as possible incorporating as much air in it as possible. Spin lightly with only enough twist to hold it together.

After spinning the woolen yarn wash in hot soapy water and then pound it by flinging it against the shower wall to full it or felt it slightly. Snap it like a whip and then rinse in cold water to shock the yarn and continue the fulling (felting) process. At this point you can brush it to produce a nap if you want. It can also be brushed after knitting or weaving. A nap will make a warmer fabric.

The more crimp a fiber has the less the shrink will be. If you spin a straight worsted fiber in a woolen way the shrink will be greater.

If you have fiber that has more than 7 crimps per inch, spin this fiber woolen. With fibers that have less than 7 crimps per inch spin it worsted.

You have to have some structure in your finished product somewhere. If you spin loose and light, then knit with small needles to knit tight or it will shrink excessively.

Tender wool, that is, wool that has a break in it, can be used in woolen yarns as this wool can accept short fibers. If the wool is too short the short fibers will not be caught and held in the yarn. These short fibers will migrate to the surface of the yarn or garment and cause pills.

Storing Wool:

Pack wool for storage really tight. This decreases moth and mice damage. Moth eggs can easily live 100s of years. Chalk, tea bags, or silica gel all help keep the wool from being damaged.

Dyeing Fibers

Very white animals dye easier. That means that the white of spotted Icelandic sheep will take dyes best. Sheep have been bred for this very "white white" or absence of color to increase dyeing properties. Some Icelandic wool doesn't dye well. How well a fiber dyes, depends on how many dye sites there are in the fiber. Dye sites are the places on the fiber that will accept the dye. Primitive breeds have few dye sites. Modern breeds have been bred for wool with more dye sites. Dye sites are protein sites on the fiber that will lock in the color with the least amount of dye.

Naturally colored sheep have fewer dye sites. Damaged fiber dyes easier; wool is easily damaged by water such as rain. Thus the weather-damaged back wool will accept dye more easily.

Spinning Marbled Yarns

Taking three different colors of roving and holding them side-by-side and spinning a yarn from these three rovings will produce a beautifully marbled yarn. The fiber is drafted back and forth between the colors to get this effect.