



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

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Deb Kimball, Editor

Spin That Belly Wool

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(Warning: this article is for dedicated wool gatherers only!)

I had heard that the belly wool on the sheep was the softest, best-handling part of the fleece, but because of its unfortunate location it can also be the dirtiest, most vegetation-laden and matted part of the fleece, so is often thrown out. However, undaunted by these negatives, I saved all belly wool from the fall shearing (8 months growth) and put them aside to be dealt with later.

When “later” came, it was discovered that some of the belly wool was just too short to be spinnable; some was glued together in dirt laden felted clumps, and other was candidates for a wash, combing and spinning.

Everyone has a different process for washing and here is what I did with the belly wool. Each “belly” was put into its own mesh lingerie bag. My washing machine was filled with HOT (probably 142 degree water) and “TIDE” was added and dissolved. Then the bags of belly wool were very gently pushed down into the washer with a large spoon (as the water was too hot for my hands) and allowed to soak until the water had cooled to warm. The washing machine was allowed to drain and spin (but never, EVER to agitate) and the bags were removed. If the fleeces (bellies) were still dirty, the process was repeated. (In the future I will try “Basic H” a Shaklee product recommended by Quail Hill Carding Co., as Tide leaves the wool with a “dry” handle, although it does remove the dirty.

Anyhow, after two washes, the process was repeated with one or two rinses, using hot water and soaking until warm. If the water drains clean and clear after the first rinse, the second may not be necessary. Then the bellies were spun-dry and air-dried in a warm room for several days. Then, with a fine toothed dog comb (10 teeth per inch), I flick-combed each lock of wool and was rewarded by a lovely, soft tog-and-thel combination, ready for spinning! The tog was up to 8” long and the thel about 3 1/2” which I never would have believed looking at the belly wool as it came off the sheep!

Some belly wool may appear too short or too matted for use at first, but when a lock is gently separated out and stretched, it may actually be alright. So give them a try before tossing those bellies on the compost heap!