

Wool Fleece. To Wash or Not to Wash? That is the Question.

Ann Fisher, Ceredigion and Online Guilds

Whenever I am asked whether it is best to wash sheep's fleece before spinning, or spin raw fleece 'in the grease', I always have the same answer.

Yes. Wash it.

Always.

This is why.

I sat at my spinning wheel with my first home produced fleece all those years ago in 2001. It was a hot summer's day, and I had one of my first sheared fleeces, still warm from the sheep's back. I was proud of myself. As a new sheep keeper, and with Foot and Mouth disease all around, I had no choice but to shear my own sheep. With no experience, and no clippers, I used hand shears. It took a long time and was hard work, but the sheep was uncut, relaxed and happy with the whole process, and the fleece had no double cuts.

The pale grey Shetland x Ryeland fleece was sound, visibly clean, no muck or vegetable matter, no problem areas at all, and the grease was flowing so well that the yarn practically spun itself. Bliss. Surely this is the way to spin. No washing, no carding or combing preparation, no extra time wasted on fibres which would remain unspun.

Somewhere along the way I was aware of a very salty taste in my mouth. I must have inadvertently licked my fingers. Looking down I saw my greasy, and by now slightly brown fingers. Well, I had been spinning for ages, so it was to be expected I suppose. So I washed my hands and carried on spinning. As I washed them I was aware of stinging in lots of places on my hands. Small cuts and abrasions, and the salty suint was being washed into the broken skin. Oh well, I thought, I have had a tetanus injection, I will be fine.

I was lucky. Other than some red itchy places on my hands for a few days I was OK. There are very real biohazards with handling unwashed fleece. Zoonotic diseases such as those caused by the Orf virus, and the Anthrax bacterium, can survive for years away from an infected animal, and infect a person through even small skin wounds. It is vital that, when handling raw fleece, that skin is unbroken, that hands are kept away from the face, and are immediately washed afterwards. On far too many occasions I have seen wool fleeces on display for handling, open for anyone, including children, to feel and fondle, and for sale at public events. Whilst this in itself is not a problem, it becomes a problem if hand sanitising is not available alongside the fleece. When exhibiting fleece I have alcohol sanitisers and insist that anyone touching a fleece cleans their hands before leaving. Though some sites advise washing hands, the washing sites are not next to the fleeces, and visitors can easily forget or get distracted. Last but not least, and a very important point here for anyone exhibiting or selling fleece as part of a Guild demonstration – the Association insurance is invalidated if there is any unwashed fleece involved.

I was happy with the yarn I spun and plied, it had the diameter and twist I wanted, and the ply looked perfect. The next job was to wet finish the skein. The first shock was just how brown the water was. How come? The fleece looked clean! It looked as though I had washed the fleece in a cup of coffee. That brown – well, like it or not, it is not just earthy dirt.



Spinning in the grease from freshly shorn wool
Photo: Thomas Fisher



Above: Wool used for spinning the sample skeins
Left: raw; Right: washed
Photos by the author unless otherwise stated



Above: Dirt trapped in twist

Below: Dirt from just 8g wool



Remembering that I had put my fingers in my mouth earlier I felt somewhat sick.

The next disappointment was that when the wool was dry, the spinning and plying twist I had created was not the same as when I had spun it. Why? Well, spinning with extra dirt and grease coating the fibres has the effect of making them seem larger than they are, and thus need less twist for a pleasing, appropriate yarn. Once that dirt and grease was washed out, and the true size of the fibres revealed, it was clear that the yarn was too loosely spun and plied. Should I try and compensate for this with a firmer twist, more of the grease and dirt is left trapped in the yarn, held in the twist, and becomes impossible to be washed out. As the grease in wool oxidises on exposure to air it waxes, and goes hard. Well, I wouldn't want to be wearing that...

When I went back to my wheel I was surprised to see the hooks and flyer coated in dark brown waxy stuff. Even from this small amount – I had spun only a couple of hundred grams – the build-up of dirt and greasy wax was appreciable. As I cleaned the hooks I was aware that there were now grooves in the hooks, where the wool had flowed through. Wool itself is surprisingly abrasive, but the dirt and grit from the unwashed fleece must surely have contributed to that too.

Since I started teaching spinning, I have often had students who are already spinning, and usually spin 'in the grease', as this is what their previous teachers have advocated. From what I gather, it was a very 'in' thing in the 1970s with the back-to-nature self-sufficiency revival. Their hand carders are so coated in a build up of old, sticky, waxed grease and dirt that they are all but impossible to use. Also, I find that the grease has attacked the rubber cloth of the carders. Rubber and grease do not make good partners. The grease makes the rubber slack, and the carder covering becomes bubbled and loose. At best it can be re-stapled to the paddles, but is better if completely replaced. If the cloth is otherwise sound, dirty, waxy carders can be cleaned by repeatedly carding fresh, ultra clean wool. It is hard work, especially at first, trying to drag the wool through the build up of sticky horrible brown goo.

A properly selected, skirted and sorted fleece is a joy to scour, and a delight to spin. There really is no extra effort, and all the subsequent preparations and spinning time are made easier, and more productive. There are no health hazards, and the spun yarn will finish as expected with no disappointing results.

Yes, I wash my fleece.

Always.

www.gov.uk/government/collections/orf-characteristics-and-diagnosis

www.gov.uk/guidance/anthrax-how-to-spot-and-report-the-disease

About the author: An experienced autodidact who began spinning 20 years ago, and gained distinction in her Certificate of Achievement in 2013, Ann enthusiastically teaches spinning at all levels, from beginners to advanced. An all-rounder with an in depth grasp of the basics and why they work the way they do, Ann also runs her own online textile equipment mail order business www.spinwise.co.uk



Above, skein before washing, and right, skein after washing, showing 2g dirt lost in washing



Sample skeins, left spun from greasy fleece, and right, spun from scoured fleece



The same sample skeins after wet finishing/washing in the skein

