

Basic Drum Carding

Freyalyn Close-Hainsworth

A drum carder is an excellent tool for fibre preparation, for either spinning or felting, but it's not a magic machine into which you can stuff huge amounts of raw fleece and instantly get beautiful, light, fluffy batts straight out the other end! This article is going to discuss how I like to use a drum carder to prepare a fleece, and this is the technique I teach in workshops. Other people may do it differently but this way works for me. There are also many demonstrations online; watch a few and pick out the techniques that work best for you.

If possible, do your carding outside. Carding wool, by hand or by drum carder, creates lots of dust, no matter how clean the fleece. I like to fasten my drum carder to a Workmate worktable; I can move around it easily, and the dust and dirt just fall straight through (and if it starts raining I can bring it inside quickly.) Like hand-carding, you need to start with a well-scoured fleece. An unwashed fleece will transfer its grease and dirt to the drum carder's teeth, and they are almost impossible to clean.

Really short or long fleeces don't work well on a drum carder; the smaller licker-in drum will pull out the short fibres as the wool passes under (which is good for most fleeces, but not if the short fibres are all you have), and too-long fibres will wrap all the way round the bigger drum and be very hard to pull off. The fleece I've used for the photographs is a grey Shetland, mid-softness for the breed, and about 10-12cm staple length.

Start by sorting your fleece, splitting it up into coarser/longer wool and shorter/finer, or mixing it all together if that's what you want. Decide which part you are going to use, and open it up with your hands, pulling apart any matted tips, and shaking it out. I like to load directly on to the main drum for the first pass. Hold a small handful of fleece in your hand and use the other hand to turn the carder, allowing the teeth to grab the fleece a small amount at a time, opening up the locks as it does so. This enables you to build up a mostly even layer of fleece across the drum. But don't overload it – it's easier to control less fibre to start off with. I rarely use more than three handfuls of wool for each one.



Drum carder on the worktable

All photos: Freyalyn Close-Hainsworth



Scoured fleece



Laying the fleece on the drum



Layer of fleece on the drum



Spike inserted in the groove on the drum

Remove the batt by standing at the end of the drum carder, slide the spike along the hollow in the drum, and pull it towards you and downwards. This will make it easier to peel the batt from the drum in one piece.

When you take this first batt off the drum, it will look very uneven. Split it in half and feed this on to the drum carder via the tray (always split a batt up before feeding it through again, it's much easier and better to process thinner layers of wool). Don't try and pull it back to slow it down, all you will do is lock the wool on to the small drum and prevent it loading on to the main drum. The action of carding itself happens as the wool passes from the small licker-in drum to the large one; once the wool is on the large drum no further carding will happen no matter how many times you rotate it.

The batt will be much more even and bulkier as you remove it after the second pass. In many cases, that's all a fleece will need to produce a nice batt. Sometimes a third pass is required. However, if you keep passing wool through a drum carder again and again, it will not continue to improve. Neps, or small knots of tangled wool, will start to form in overprocessed batts, and the constant stretching of the wool fibres will eventually damage and break them.

If you want much bigger, thicker batts, it's much more effective to make several thin batts first and then combine them into one on the final pass through the carder. This is where the brush attachment comes in useful, to compact the wool down into the teeth of the large drum. You can tell when you have reached your carder's limit when loose fibres start to float across the surface of the large drum as it rotates. If your drum carder doesn't have a brush attachment, it's perfectly possible to use a soft hand-broom and hold it against the drum as you combine and load the final few batts.

You can see in the final batt opposite, of two smaller batts combined into one, that there are a few neps starting to form. Another pass would just create more neps, but the wool is nicely opened up and organised and doesn't need to go through again.



Peeling the batt off the drum

Once each batt is finished, I like to twist them round my hand and tuck the end in, which I find preserves the structure and lightness better than keeping them flat. Like all wool once it's been processed, whether tops, rolags, batts, or roving, it will eventually compact on storage, so I do recommend using it sooner rather than later.

Everyone uses fibre tools differently. The more you use either hand-cards or a drum carder, the more you will find what works for you, and what produces the fibre-prep that you prefer to use.

About the author: Freyalyn has been spinning for a long time now (knitting for even longer, and dyeing and weaving for a bit less), and teaching for twenty years. She lives in East Lancashire with three dogs, three cats, and a very supportive husband.



Batt after two passes



Batt ready for third pass



Preparing a thicker batt from several thin ones



First batt



Batt split into thin layers



Thicker batt prepared from several thinner ones



Carded fleece ready to spin