



## Spinning a Yarn of Your Own: The Magic of Spinning

**Read all about the ways that yarn is spun, worsted or woolen.**

(From Spinning a Yarn of Your Own, by Adrienne L. Shtop, page 2 of 2)

Yarn is spun in one of two ways: “woolen” or “worsted.”

Woolen yarns are comprised of short and long fibers mixed together in a process called “carding.”

When spun, this jumble produces a fuzzy, soft and lofty yarn that traps a lot of air.

If you want a smooth, strong yarn, you need to spin by the worsted method. “Combing” prepares fleece for worsted spinning by arranging the fibers parallel to one another.

Fibers of 2- to 4-inch staple are usually carded and spun by the woolen method.

A pair of hand carders, wooden paddles with fine wire teeth on one side, is used to open and separate the mass of fleece. The fleece is initially pulled across one of the carders and catches on the teeth. The other carder is brushed across the fleece several times until the fibers start to straighten out and separate.

When the wool is evenly distributed between the two carders, it is transferred back to the first one. The process needs to be repeated about three or four times to straighten and fluff all the fibers. The wool is then rolled up and taken off the carder. This “rolag” of wool is now ready to be spun.

Fleece longer than four inches in staple is difficult to card, so it is combed.

Wool combs have rows of thick tines instead of teeth and are more expensive than carders. The process also requires a bit more skill. A lock of fleece is pulled onto the tines of one of the combs and the other is stroked down the lock to separate the fibers.

One begins at the tips of the lock and works back, much like combing long, tangled hair.

The wool is removed from the combs with a “diz”--a round, concave tool with a hole in the center through which the fibers are pulled.

When fleece is combed, the finished product is known as “wool top” or “roving.”

Since combing aligns the long wool fibers parallel to each other and separates out any short bits, the wool top is easy to spin, and the resulting worsted yarn is quite smooth and lustrous. One can also spin fleece with a long staple straight from the lock with only a minimal amount of teasing to open the fiber. This makes long wool a favorite among handspinners.

### It's All in the Twist

Loose fibers become yarn by introducing twist. The twist holds the fibers together and gives them strength.

Originally, fiber was twisted in the fingers or between the palm and one leg. The first major advance in spinning technology was the development of the “spindle”--a shaft with a weight at one end, or “whorl,” that strengthens the spin.

Wall paintings from ancient Egypt depict spinners using “drop spindles,” which twirl in mid-air. Other spindles are supported on one end by a bowl or a rock. The traditional spindle of the Navajo, the “Beedizi,” is one such device.

The drop spindle enjoys great popularity because it is portable, efficient, easy to learn and inexpensive.

Drop spindles can be found in many styles and price ranges, from plain sticks with weights to those made of hand-turned, exotic woods; many spinners have mastered the use of the drop spindle from instructions in a book.

The next innovation in yarn-making was the spinning wheel, believed to have been invented in India between 500 and



1,000 A.D.

Quicker than the spindle, the spinning wheel is turned by hand or by a foot pedal known as a “treadle.”

Treadle wheels are widely used today and a large variety of such wheels is available. While most spinners suggest lessons from an experienced teacher before working with a spinning wheel, there are wheel spinners who are self-taught.

To get started spinning, veterans recommend a “top whorl” drop spindle that has a hook on one end to anchor the yarn. Tie a short length of thread under the whorl, bring it over the top, wrap it around the hook and make a loop.

Gently pull a small amount of fiber from your rolag or wool top without detaching it-- this is called “drawing.”

Place the drawn fibers inside the loop.

Hold the rolag or top with one hand, pinching it where the drawn fibers meet the rest of the wool.

Your other hand twirls the spindle, which creates a twist that travels up the fibers and stops at your pinch.

As long as you hold some tension on your yarn, the twist will try to move into the unspun fiber.

By pinching and drawing, you control the thickness of the spun yarn. The amount of spindle twirl sets the tightness of the twist. When more wool is needed, it is attached to the yarn already spun, creating a continuous thread.

Yarns at this stage are known as “singles.” Singles have a pronounced twist.

Before it can be used, the twist must be reduced, which is accomplished by “plying.” Plying is simply twisting two or more singles together in the opposite direction from the way each was originally spun.

Done correctly, the plied yarn will not curl back on itself. Plying takes much less time than spinning, and is the last step before winding the yarn into skeins and balls.

Once you have balls of yarn, you’re ready to knit!

**What Once Was Straw, Now is Gold**

For knitters, there’s nothing quite like a ball of your own handspun yarn.

It is incredibly satisfying to start with the raw materials when you create your garment.

Spinning one’s own yarn also gives infinite creative control. For the adventurous fiber artist, every step of the process yields a tantalizing array of choices, like a full painter’s palette.

The beginning spinner and knitter can be confident that she is learning the fundamentals of crafts that will keep her interested for many years to come.

Knitting has become so popular again that it’s not hard to find lessons. If you buy even a small amount of yarn, the shopkeeper will gladly show you how to get started. Also check with your local spinning and knitting guild. Guild members are devoted to their crafts and happy to share their knowledge.

Scarves are always good first projects because you can concentrate on the knitting instead of on the shaping of the garment. Make a “sampler” scarf to see how your new yarn looks in several different stitch patterns.

If you have small quantities of homespun yarn, and want more immediate gratification, try a hat. Simple hat patterns can really show off a yarn’s texture and sheen.

Once you are spinning large quantities of yarn, you can create truly one-of-a-kind sweaters, coats, blankets and even rugs.

Whatever you do with your finished yarn, don’t give it back to your sheep!



About the Author: Adrienne L. Shtop is a writer, photographer and avid knitter and knitwear designer. Passionate about nature, crafts and community, she offers workshops on herbs and wild edibles, knitting and energy healing.

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