



by Clara Parkes

I have a confession to make. The day I picked the project for this column, it was so grey and dreary that even my solar-powered Queen Elizabeth wouldn't wave. I saw Janine LeCras' Wavelettes shawl and thought, "hey, now there's a candidate for cashmere."

Never mind that the shawlette is already knit in a Merino/cashmere/silk blend that's probably the most appropriate and affordable cashmere combination for this project. No, I'd find others, come up with a vaguely plausible story about why they were somehow different, and spend a week playing with cashmere. Not for any technical reasons that could make you a better knitter, but simply because I was in a bad mood.

Luckily, reason and curiosity prevailed. I was at the Madrona marketplace gazing at a wall of Brooklyn Tweed yarns, sighing happily as one does. I thought of Wavelettes, its slinky, hand-dyed Merino/cashmere/silkiness, and how dramatically different the woolen-spun fleece-dyed Brooklyn Tweed Loft would be. Could be interesting, yes?



Loft Yarn

Indeed it is. The results are so different that it's almost unrecognizable from the original. For those who don't know, Loft is a woolen-spun yarn—which means that it's spun from fibers that have only been carded together, rather than being thoroughly combed and aligned prior to spinning. Woolen-spun yarns are really more like air enclosed in a crimped veil of fiber. Loft is so true to its name that it can easily snap if you tug too hard.



Loft Swatch

I got a skein and started swatching. Loft's innate elasticity made the pattern's semi-acrobatic knit and purl decreases painless. When I washed my swatch, all the loose ends of the crimped fiber reached out, joined hands, and created a puffy, cohesive fabric.

While the bloomed surface detracted from individual stitch clarity, it did lend emphasis to the broader stockinette brushstrokes on either side of the central seed-stitch motif, and it also

smoothed out the horizontal lines made by the three stitches slipped with yarn in front. The yarn-overs were the only clear casualty of the woolen bloom, with all but the bottom-most yarn over closing in on itself within each motif repeat. All in all, Loft would be an outstanding choice if you wanted an earthy, woolen hug.

Up next, I shifted from pure poof to something smoother and slinkier, Isager Alpaca 2. This fingering-weight yarn contains 50% Merino and 50% baby alpaca, intimately blended and spun together into a smooth, somewhat springy two-ply yarn. Such construction is ideal for lace, because the two plies (in smoother yarns, that is) push away from one another, holding open the space around them—especially within angular lines of yarn overs.



Isager Yarn

Instead of the stockinette bands, here the visual emphasis fell more on those yarn overs and the U-shaped band of strands in front of the slipped stitches. Also emphasized were the angular lines of decreases on either side of the central seed stitch. After washing and minimal blocking, my swatch showed the beginnings of a halo, mostly from protruding ends of the baby alpaca. Where the Loft was pure sponginess, Alpaca 2 behaved in a more traditionally relaxed, shawl-like manner, thanks

to the slinkiness of the baby alpaca.



Isager Swatch

Finally, I decided to try something completely beyond the norm: A cone of the new, ultra-over-twisted Merino (fittingly called Overtwist, or NS-2B) from Habu Textiles. At its core, the yarn is composed of six two-ply strands that are all plied in the same “S” direction, making it an S-on-S cable yarn. Only the final ply of all those component strands is done at an extraordinarily tight, perpendicular angle—in essence forcing an imbalance into the yarn. I used the same needle size as for my previous swatches and the results were far too small. Despite the yarn’s diminutive

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circumference, it needs lots of space. I switched to a U.S. size 10 (6mm) needle and resumed, this time with excellent results.



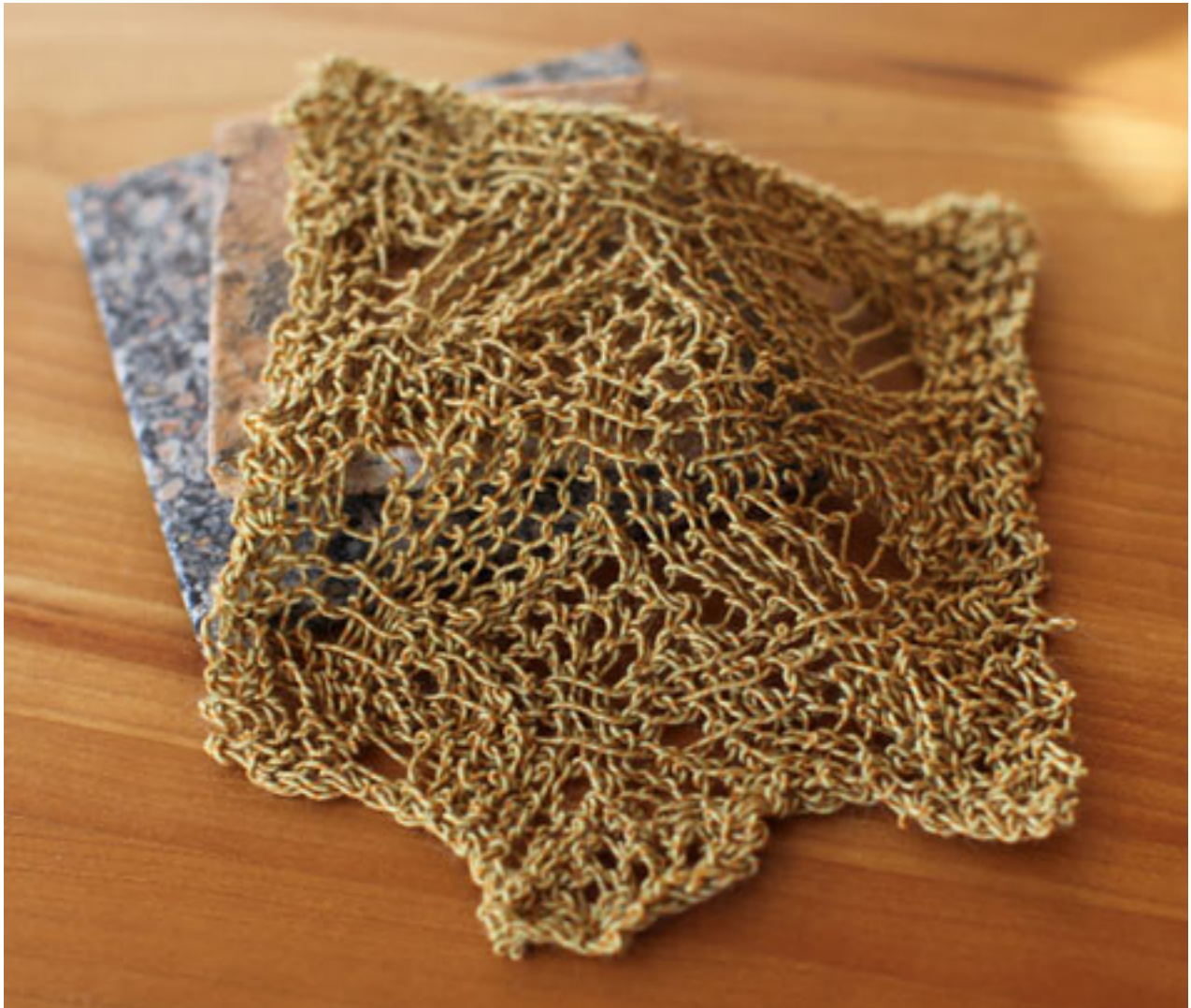
Habu Yarn

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The yarn has so much excess twist that it was constantly twisting back on itself as I worked. I had to dangle my swatch several times to release some of the twist. But the real adventure began when I washed the swatch. The springy Merino fibers innately wanted to relax and release their pent-up energy. My stitches were big enough that the yarn had room to move around, resulting in waves of curling, kinking stitches, like a calligraphy pen gone wild.



Habu Swatch

In some cases the yarn overs became enormous gaping holes, while some of the horizontal lines of slipped stitches developed curlicue embellishment. This is definitely the most elegant,

unexpected yarn for the shawl. I'd imagine a full-sized Wavelettes out of this would automatically turn me into that tall, slender woman with a top-floor apartment on the Upper East Side, a circle of cosmopolitan friends and a successful career at, say, a top advertising agency. That's how it works, right?