

Good Fibrations: the Zen of Shearing

by Barbara Parry

photos by Ben Barnhart

Spring

In early March winter begins to release its grip on my New England sheep farm. I keep a flock of 76 Cormo and Border Leicesters on 220 upland acres in the Berkshire foothills of western Massachusetts. Here on Patten Hill as icy back roads thaw from glacial hardpan to mud pudding, I prepare for my annual wool clip. For me and for many other fiber farmers in the Northeast, the outcome of the next six weeks will tell the story of a year's hard work and also set the stage for the coming year.



The Work of a Yarn Farmer

There are many farms like mine throughout the U.S. engaged in the entire process of fiber production, what I like to call yarn farming. Shepherds like me cultivate a flock for specific wool traits, birth the lambs, raise the sheep, then make determinations on twist and grist, and send those instructions along with our fiber to small mills around the country so that we can bring our product to market in the form of finished skeins. Some of us add further value by hand dyeing, and we even create pattern support for our farm product. We market our own yarns under our own labels, selling directly to knitters at fiber events, or on-line through our websites, and sometimes through local yarn stores. Each farm's product is precious, unique and limited. As with other forms of agriculture, each year yields one harvest - just one chance to get it right.

With the growing localvore movement, knitters are casting on with farm yarns in increasing numbers. The stitches on your needles transcribe in wool the farm's history over the past year. If the summer rains were kind and the flock had ample graze, the yarn glows with vitality. If the sheep were crowded at the winter mangers, the fleece will show it. Either way, the yarn tells the tale.



As many knitters have discovered, purchasing farm yarns holds many advantages. You learn to detect the subtle nuances that set the wool of each sheep breed apart. Knitting with farm yarn puts you on a first name basis with a fiber producer and the sheep who grew the fleece. You come to know the flock, the names of lambs and how they spend their days. The stories behind the yarn give it a distinct identity. As you cast on, you tap into the spirit of a flock.

Good Fibrations - Shearing Day

It's four weeks before lambing, which means time for one of the most anticipated events in a shepherd's year: shearing day. The date has been circled in red on my calendar since I pulled the ram from the breeding flock last November. For days my assistant Holly and I have been planning and strategizing as we sip our morning lattes. Which group goes first? How shall we arrange the pens? Can we keep everyone dry under one roof if it's raining? Do we have enough clean sheep coats to clothe the flock?



Early in the morning before the arrival of my shearer, Andy Rice, we pull together my flock of 76 from three different outbuildings. Gathering boys and girls in close proximity creates a stir that makes it difficult to maintain a mellow vibe in the shearing barn. We keep some buffer space between the pens.

Andy arrives. While he assembles his hand piece -- the electric shearing blade and comb he will use on my Cormo flock -- we usher the sheep into pens and remove the special coats they wear to protect their fleeces from dirt and chaff all winter long. Since contamination can be one of the largest detractors from wool quality, the winter wardrobe is essential for keeping fleeces clean in tight winter feeding quarters. The sheep stand patiently as we unveil and admire each fleece. They've been wearing coats all their lives and know the drill.



My husband, Mike, draws the first ewe, Cassandra, from the pen and onto the shearing board. Andy pulls the cord that starts the purr of the electric shears; the background hum becomes the mantra for the day. Turning Cassandra's head back over her shoulder, he gently tilts her onto the board. Balanced on her rump and cradled against the shearer's legs, Cassie senses there is little point in struggling from a this position and comfortably settles into a Zen-like trance. Andy begins tracing the shearing pattern with his blade.



The process of separating sheep from fleece is a bit like unzipping a baby from a bunting. Andy starts by unbuttoning the belly wool with a series of short strokes of the shears called "blows". Protecting the udder with his hand, he works the blade around the "crotch", the ewe's hindquarters. He next unfleeces the left rear leg then unzips the upper portion of the fleece at the neck like a sweater by working the comb upward from brisket to chin. He cleans the face and strips the left front shoulder. A deft 90° pivot of the ewe on her fanny is followed by the long blows that run the entire length of sheep from tail to ears. He then strips the right flank. There is no rushing here; we work entirely within the moment to the rattle and hum of the shears. Shearing is not a race. We breathe and channel our collective energy. Mellow sheep yield premium fleeces.



My shearing team is a disparate group of trusted and dedicated friends who enjoy the occasional shearing gig. Each of us has a role and we work together in rhythmic choreography. Mike extracts an unwilling ewe from the holding pen. As Andy shears, I kneel on the shearing board, positioning myself across from him where I have the best view of the fleece as it comes off the sheep and the ewe's condition as she is disrobed. I perform a rough skirting as the fiber falls to the board, pitching manure tags, butt and belly wool into the junk bucket and flicking away any second cuts. I toss the "frits" -- neck wool unsuitable for yarn but may be salvaged for other uses -- into another bin. I pause to palpate her unborn lambs through her now naked belly. As I skirt, Caleb sweeps and Mike readies the next ewe.



As the ewe springs from the shearing board, Laurie shakes open a large plastic bag. We roll the fleece into a fragrant bun that radiates warmth and the essence of good sheep karma. I pause to examine a staple which shows the character of the wool. Good Cormo wool is fine and uniform in crimp, snowy white in color. I hold the staple to my ear and tugging at both ends, give it a snap and listen. A clean "ping" signifies a healthy fleece. "Snap, crackle, pop" means tender wool that spells p-i-i-y yarn.

Cassandra's fleece is sound and glistens with lanolin. Nirvana.



The freshly naked ewe enters the wardrobe pen where Holly and Gale fit her into a new coat, a size smaller than the one shed fifteen minutes ago. She needs little coaxing back into the fold where fresh water and a manger of sweet summer grass await.



The mound of bagged wool climbs as we work our way through the flock. Holly tends to the freshly coiffed ewes who jostle and spar at first. It takes them a while to recognize each other.

A day later, I am at the skirting table. I throw each fleece and examine them more closely for consistency, strength, and length. Lifting the blanket of fleece, cut-ends facing down, I shake to dislodge any shorter pieces and second cuts. I carefully fold each fleece into a box soon destined for the fiber mill. Skirting fleece and shipping wool will fill my days as I ready for lambing time, just around the corner.

[Read more in The Great Lamb Storm of 2006](#)
