

By Clara Parkes

*I've got farm yarns on the brain these days, having just written a new book, **The Knitter's Book of Wool** (due in October), which may explain why Jennifer Appleby's hat, M'Gonigle, called to me. With its simple ribbing, wandering cable motifs, and classic wooly look, it begs to be knit in an old-fashioned farm yarn. M'Gonigle presents an ideal opportunity to wander through a variety of sheep breeds and spinning techniques to illustrate how using fiber from different breeds can give you strikingly different results from a single pattern.*

The sample shown in the magazine was knit using Briggs & Little Sport, a rustic sport-weight singles made from domestic Canadian wool from unspecified breeds. Briggs & Little is a woolen mill—Canada's oldest, in fact—which means that it spins traditional lofty, jumbled, woolen yarns. A lot of farm yarns are spun this way, and it works best on those fibers that are three inches or shorter and have a lot of natural curl to them (called crimp).

Even among woolen-spun yarns, you'll find much variety depending on the actual fibers being spun. I began my swatching adventure with two undyed, woolen-spun yarns from dramatically different breeds: the dual-coated Shetland and the fine wool Cormo.

The Shetland sheep belongs to what is called the “primitive” breed group, with its genetic heritage traced back to early Viking settlers nearly 1,000 years ago. It's a hearty small animal that grows a dual coat of long, wiry outer hairs dispersed evenly among an undercoat of short, soft fibers with a fine, jumbled crimp. Those short fibers are separated and spun woolen to produce an extremely lightweight, fuzzy-looking yarn that becomes an equally lightweight, fuzzy-looking garment after its first wash. I swatched a two-ply Shetland from Garthenor Organic Pure Wool, which is based in Wales and readily available to international customers online. While the fabric bloomed significantly with blocking, the yarn still provided ample stitch definition for the cable and ribbing motif.





On the other end of the woolen-spinning spectrum we have a woolen-spun two-ply Cormo from Elsa Wool Company in Colorado. Cormo belongs to the finewool category of sheep breeds, owing its existence to a crossing of Corriedale and Merino sheep. Cormo is most often compared to Merino wool, although it tends to have a slightly more chaotic crimp and a more succulent feel. Far finer than most commercial Shetland wools, the Cormo fibers spin into an extraordinarily bouncy yarn with a spongy disposition. With wash, a softer, almost velvety halo appeared across the fabric surface—warm and welcoming, though not nearly as pronounced as the Shetland.





As appealing as woolen-spun yarns are, they aren't the only yarn game in town. If you're working with fibers that are three inches or longer, it's easier to spin them after they've been more carefully combed into submission. The combing process helps remove any irregular clumps or shorter fibers, resulting in a much smoother, more fluid yarn. The smoother the yarn, the clearer the stitch definition—and you can see that contrast immediately in the next few swatches.

First, I chose a gorgeous three-ply organic Wensleydale yarn, again from Garthenor Organic Pure Wool in Wales. The Wensleydale sheep belongs to a category of breeds called “luster longwool” because it grows an extraordinarily long coat of fibers (averaging 8 to 12 inches at shearing) whose curly ringlets have a luminous luster. The fibers nest next to one another closely when spun, creating a yarn that's far more dense and fluid than it is springy. That density manifests itself in extremely clear cables that appear almost as if in high relief—rendered even more so by the yarn's brilliant luster.





Not all worsted-spun yarns have such a dense disposition or high luster. Again, it all depends on the fibers. Knitwear designer Véronik Avery chose a sturdy, full-bodied wool for Nordique, the flagship offering of her new yarn line, St-Denis. It lacks the luster of the Wensleydale but offers a much springier, more versatile disposition. Knit up, it renders our cables and ribbing with near-sculptural clarity, with no hint of the mossy barnyard we left behind with our woolens.





But what if you venture even further from the farm and use the smoothest, roundest yarn we can find? I knew it wouldn't look anything like the original Briggs & Little hat, but I was curious to see just how different it would look. For this final swatch I chose Fine from Spud & Chloe. Perhaps a little too fine for this pattern, Fine is composed of three two-ply strands that are tightly plied together to produce an extremely strong, round yarn with superb stitch definition.





The addition of 20% silk to the 80% superwash wool base brightens up the stitches to almost jewel-like clarity. But the rounder the yarn and the more twist holding in all the fibers, the more distinct each stitch is. Washing did not produce even the faintest hint of halo—what you see on the needles is what you get on the hat, like dough that doesn't rise when baked. While that may be a useful effect in some projects, it doesn't show this hat in the best possible light. I'll stick with my fuzzy woolens for this one, thank you very much.