



by Barbara Parry

A well-rounded yarn diet should include at least one helping of gorgeous goat. When you find yourself craving cashmere or mohair (or maybe a little bit of both), do a little sleuthing and you may discover that there's a farm-fresh variety near your backyard. This installment in Barbara Parry's ongoing series on fiber foraging takes a look at the local goats delivering healthy servings of luxury fiber to North American knitters.





An Angora goat and kid at Keldaby Farm. Photo courtesy Cynthia Herbert.

Mohair

Angoras are the luminaries of the fiber-goat universe and the prime source for mohair yarn. Adult Angoras produce prodigious amounts of fleece, anywhere between five to ten pounds per clip. With fleeces that can put on six to eight inches in six months time and can amount to nearly 20 percent of the animal's body weight, the goats are essentially mohair-making machines, putting everything they've got into growing fiber.

Named for Ankara, the Turkish province where the breed originated, Angora goats arrived in the U.S. in 1859 with the importation of seven does and two bucks. In the decade that followed, demand for mohair for textile production mirrored the spike in demand for domestic wool. The mohair boom hit its peak in 1965, when Texas ranches alone clipped some 31,584,000 pounds of fiber from 4,612,000 goats.

Despite their affinity for dry climates (the breed originated on the Anatolian Plateau), Angoras thrive throughout the U.S. Ranches are the norm in the West and Southwest; here, the goats are raised in large numbers on vast tracts of land, with most of the fiber siphoned off for export. In the East and Midwest, most goats are raised on small farms. Some farmers pool their mohair for sale to

brokers, but many others market their fleeces directly to knitters and other artisans in the form of yarn, roving, and locks.



The goat whisperer speaks to a kid. Photo courtesy Cynthia Herbert.

In the rolling hills of western Massachusetts, Bob Ramirez and his wife Cynthia Herbert keep a moderate flock of fifty angora goats on their exquisite farmstead, Keldaby Farm. Bob is a full-time goat whisperer; Cynthia dyes and weaves the glossy ringlets harvested from their flock into vibrant throws, scarves, ruanas, and shawls. Running the farm and marketing their product is a team effort.

Raising Angoras in the decidedly un-desert-like climate of New England has its challenges—the goats need to be safeguarded against the damp climate, especially after shearing, but Ramirez says, “The goats are so beautiful it’s worth every headache.” A visit to a goat farm will promote a deeper appreciation for these beguiling critters. Floppy-eared, savvy, inquisitive, and “more faithful than dogs” (at least according to Ramirez), Angora charm is irresistible.

Cashmere

Cashmere, that most luxurious of luxury yarns, comes from the short, fine, downy-soft undercoat of almost any kind of non-Angora goat. The bulk of the world’s cashmere supply comes from China and Mongolia, but a small niche of American fiber farmers is working to produce cashmere closer to home. As a result, one need not travel to the Mongolian steppe to meet a cashmere goat in

person or to tap into the cashmere pipeline.



In order for goat fluff to qualify as (and be authentically labeled) cashmere, the average fiber diameter must be no more than 19 microns (a micron is 1/1000 of a millimeter) with a length of at least 1.25 inches. The crimp is tight and multi-directional, giving the fiber its loft. A good adult cashmere-producing goat yields just four to six ounces of fiber a year.

While raising goats is not onerous, getting them to consistently produce quality cashmere is challenging. In 1989 Kris McGuire, founder of Capricorn Cashmere in Laramie, Wyoming, and an early entrepreneur in the American cashmere industry, hand selected and imported a foundation herd of 21 cashmere-bearing goats of Spanish descent from Australia. McGuire visited fifteen Australian ranches in her search for quality animals, and made her choices carefully. Despite this, nearly three-quarters of the original herd failed to pass on the genes for fine fiber to their offspring or failed to breed entirely. It took ten years of intensive line breeding to create a line of studs that would reliably pass on the desired genetics.



Cashmere kids at Springtide Farm. Photo by Barbara Perry

Yvonne Taylor of Black Locust Farm in Washington, Maine can also attest to the elusiveness of genetics. Two decades ago she started with three cashmere goats; today the herd numbers 120. The early days were expensive and involved “lots of driving around” at breeding time to find eligible studs for her does. “Breeding for fine diameter, nice crimp and heavy production—that’s the trick,” says Yvonne.

Harvesting and processing the fiber is another challenge. Coarse guard hairs cover the prized undercoat and these need to be removed before the fiber can be processed. When the goats shed their winter fleece, the fibers are painstakingly hand combed. Shearing is a more efficient means of harvest but comes with its own difficulties. Shorn cashmere fleece includes a fair amount of distinctly non-cashmere guard hairs and, until recently, most small-scale mills in the U.S. were not equipped to remove them. A decade ago co-op of ranchers in Sonora, Texas launched an initiative for marketing American cashmere, only to have the venture stall when they discovered that fiber would have to be shipped to Mongolia for adequate de-hairing. Fortunately, the capabilities of micro mills have much improved, making yarn production feasible for American cashmere farms.



At Springtide Farm in Bremen, Maine, cashmere breeders Wendy Pieh and Peter Goth promote the domestic cashmere scene by raising a herd of majestically-horned, sagacious goats on their rock-studded fields. Their herd provides fiber for their own yarn line, tanned pelts, meat, and foundation stock for other farms. Part of the farm's mission is educational. They welcome visitors for the first Sunday of every month in summer and clinics in goat husbandry for farmers starting their own herds.

Pygora

The Pygora breed, a cross of Pygmy and Angora goats, originated in the 1980s when breeder Katharine Jorgensen began exploring ways to improve the length of cashmere produced by her Pygmy herd. Genetic tinkering led to a soft, fine fiber that combined the best qualities of kid mohair and cashmere and a breed that produces three distinctive types of fleece.

Pygora breeder Jill Gallagher of Hollyhock Farm in Santa Margarita, California explains the difference between the three types: "Some Pygoras, labeled type A, produce fleeces resembling kid mohair with the benefit fineness that changes very little throughout the life of the goat. At first glance, a type A Pygora yarn might easily be mistaken for angora mohair. Type C goats bear the most cashmere-like fiber. In the middle lies type B: truly a combination of both: long wavy curls with sheen combined with fuzzy fine fibers." While type A fleeces are shorn, type B and C fibers require the labor-intensive process of plucking to reduce the amount of guard hair. Each animal produces

less than one pound of usable fiber per year. “Less than two ounces goes a long way,” Gallagher says of her gossamer yarns

Other Innovations

Creative crossbreeding continues to generate new twists on domestic goats and goat yarn. Cashgora goats, a crossbreed of an Angora buck and a cashmere doe, yield a fiber that combines the curliness of the Angora with the softness of cashmere, and is excellently suited for dyeing. Pycazz is the result of crossing a B-C fiber Pygora goat with a cashmere goat. Once established, each new breed has its followers, farmers who raise and strive for improvement, breed associations committed to maintaining standards.



Cashmere from Springtide Farms. Photo by Barbara Parry.

Finding Fiber

Like the produce at your favorite farmers’ market, locally produced fibers can be a bit pricier than your garden-variety yarns (there’s no such thing as economy of scale for small farms marketing their own product), but buying direct from the farm supports transparency and traceability and adds another level of connection to your knitting. Pay a visit to a goat farm and you’ll be treated to the sight of the very animals supplying the skeins for your latest scarf or sweater. Not sure where to start your search? Most breed associations provide listings for active farms. Visit the American Angora Goat Breeders Association, www.aagba.org; Colored Angora Goat Breeder Association,

www.cagba.org; Eastern Cashmere Association, www.easterncashmere.com; Northwest Cashmere Association www.northwestcashmere.blogspot.com; Pygora Breeders Association www.pygoragoats.org.