



Devon farm brings back local wool industry

South Devon's mild climate enables sheep not normally known for their fleece to produce finer, lighter wool suitable for fashion wear, throws, shawls, cushion covers and wacky walking socks.

Washbrook Farm near Kingsbridge, for example, has some fine first cross Shetland and Hebridean sheep in addition to the more traditional Suffolk and Charolais.

'Many people think Hebs are only suitable for carpet wool' says Sandy Gilbert who uses the fleece for her Proud Yarns of Kingsbridge business. 'Our Shetland and Hebridean crosses give a wonderful soft and light result in pale grey. It knits up beautifully and over-dyes well'.

Although she describes the farm as a 'modest, but enthusiastic' venture it also supports hens, Dartmoor ponies and Angora Goats.

Sandy abhors waste and is passionate about using local produce. She buys in small quantities of fleece from neighbouring farms, but from 'no more than a packhorse day away'.

Proud Yarns was boosted by her interest in hand spinning, knitting and organic dyeing, and in time these led to farm workshops and visits.

'The visits were free of charge and I relied on imparting enough enthusiasm about my products to encourage people to buy' she says.

'It was a privilege to introduce children to the relationship between animals and the product. Being a hand spinner gives me an advantage to demonstrate the whole process'.

Proud Yarns produces quality yarn, natural and coloured fleece ready for felting and spinning, knitting kits and ready made fashion wear.

Sandy now has two outworkers working, weather permitting, from her air conditioned studio (pictured) and looks forward to a slow, but healthy growth that will allow her to purchase more fibre.

This year she has been experimenting with dyeing using natural plants and Kool-aid. A neighbour produced a crop of weld she has used to produce a vibrant green, the season's most popular colour. Next year she will have her own crop and will also work with woad.

'Local farmers are currently receiving a poor return on very fine fleece' she says. 'Wouldn't it be great if we could get back a thriving locally-based woollens industry?'

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