



Small-scale yarn making: information sheet

It should be noted that this is information gained from the internet, our processing experience and through talking extensively to many people. It is accurate to the best of our knowledge but you should rely on your own research and direct contact to get your fibre processed.

Getting a small amount of fibre processed can be a very satisfying project, particularly for the fleece of a special animal. As our own minimum is 10kg for scour/card only and 20kg for spinning into yarn, this information sheet concentrates on options for smaller amounts.

Key points to remember

- We regularly suggest people can approach mini mills and they may tell people with larger quantities to approach us, but this does not mean that we are formally recommending any services, as we have never used them ourselves
- If possible, you should take your fibre to the mill or spinner, see around and see what else they are making to gain an idea of their work and quality
- You will always find both delighted and dis-satisfied customers of all mills and spinners - it obviously depends on the quality of the processing, but do remember that it also depends on what the customer was expecting and very much on the quality of the fibre and its suitability for the particular process chosen. You should carefully consider any advice given to you by a processor and recognise that not taking it could result in a less good product, but as these are natural materials they will vary from batch to batch, colour to colour, year to year – even from the same group of animals
- You will need to talk to your potential commission spinner in detail to get exact information and you will need to consider carriage costs in addition to the spinning and other processing and finishing charges: in particular check whether the price is for incoming fibre or finished yarn as the amount you get back will always be considerably less than the amount you send in, particularly if the mill is scouring/washing the fleeces
- You will need to check whether you will be getting your own fibre turned into your own yarn or other products or whether it will be pooled with other similar fibre or colours
- You should also check whether the quoted prices include or exclude VAT, as mills generally work on a business-to-business basis and therefore may quote prices ex VAT. Hand spinners are unlikely to be VAT rated
- You will need to get an indication of the potential time the processing will take. At The Natural Fibre Company, we do always advise our customers that to get woven or knitted textiles (as opposed purely to yarns, where we quote up to 6 months but try to do better) they should work on the basis of aiming to have stock for the autumn of the year **after** the year in which shearing takes place
- Mini mills, like the larger mills, often provide additional services, such as weaving, duvets or felt making and even sewing and knitting, which may also be of interest and most of them can also suggest other people to undertake dyeing, weaving, etc. Similarly your local Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers will include a variety of skilled people
- Finally you need to check with other customers to see if they are satisfied.



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Our minimum order for making felt, scoured/carded fleece for hand-spinning or felting and stuffing is 10kg. For spinning to knitting yarns we need a minimum of 20kg while for weaving it is 40kg. An individual fleece can weigh between 1kg and 10kg, depending on the breed!

Shorn fleeces can be stored with care for up to 3 years without serious deterioration, so you do not necessarily have to collect your fibre all at once. If stored cool and dry (for instance hanging in an old duvet cover in a barn), wool, mohair and alpaca will all keep well – damp can risk mildew and being on the ground allows mice to consider moving in! The main risk is probably moths, particularly for alpaca, and you should check regularly to ensure these pests are not invading, kill them and remove any contaminated or damaged fleece immediately. Before storing, please remember to skirt the fleeces and remove vegetation and faeces as this will not help the quality during storage.

Hand spinners

- These may be quite difficult to find and often tend only to make things for their own business to sell. They do undertake commission work, but you would need to talk to them individually and - very importantly - see samples of their work to check the quality.
- It takes an experienced spinner around one hour to spin 100 yards of singles, so this has to be multiplied by 3 for a 3-ply yarn, plus the plying time, which will be a bit shorter than an hour. It also takes time to wash, blend and card the fleece first, to prepare it for spinning. A medium 36" chest pullover would take around 0.5 kg or 1000 metres of Double Knitting yarn (considerably more of finer, and obviously less of thicker yarns).
- Therefore it will not surprise you to learn that hand spinning is also fairly expensive! We would expect that you should pay at least £500 for 0.5 kg of yarn, if not more, though hand spinners tend to under-price their work as few people will pay what it should really cost for expert craft work. When you consider that 1000 metres will take up to 2 weeks of time, you will, we are sure, agree that this is actually pretty cheap and of course the yarn is totally individual and special.
- You will also need to recognise that it may take some time to get your yarn returned.
- The best place to find hand spinners is via the federation of guilds of **Weavers, Spinners and Dyers, WSD** - <http://www.wsd.org.uk/> - from here you can locate the local guild, and contact its secretary or attend its meetings.
- One of the best and most satisfying answers could be to learn hand-spinning as many spinners are delighted to share their skills and a small spinning group would be a nice social and creative thing to do as well as sharing the cost.



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Mini mills: from 1kg of fleece ...

- There are currently several mini mills which specialise in alpaca: the East Anglian Alpaca Mill in Norfolk <http://www.eastangliaalpacomill.co.uk/> , Two Rivers Mill in Dorset, with a 10kg minimum, full worsted spinning <http://www.tworiversmill.com/> , and **The Border Mill** <http://www.thebordermill.co.uk/> in Dumfries, who will also process wool
- In addition, there is **Griffiths Mill** <http://www.griffithsfarming.com/mill.html> in Derbyshire who do woollen spinning, mainly of wool but also spin alpaca
- Mini mills usually charge on **incoming** weight of fibre, at £40-60 per kg depending on the fineness of yarn required (finer is more expensive as it takes longer), which, after the reduction due to washing, etc. will probably increase the cost of the yarn to around £65-70 per kilogram, plus the finishing charges for making balls, etc. This is still cost effective if you only want a small amount made. Most of the mills give prices on their websites
- Mini mills usually use a semi worsted process, which produces very nicely handling and soft yarns, but these will be less even than yarns from a bigger mill, due to the smaller processing machinery. Not all of them do ball-winding or skeins
- There is also **Diamond Fibres** http://www.diamondfibres.co.uk/site_map.htm , who specialise in semi worsted and full worsted spinning for long wools, taking small orders from 10kg up to a maximum of 20kg of wool, mohair and alpaca and require a minimum staple length of 4" (10cm) and are in Sussex.

Last point: remember you will need to learn to make felt, knit, crochet or weave once you have your processed fibre or yarn, as felters, hand-knitters, hand-crocheters and hand-weavers who undertake commissioned work are also relatively rare ... a yarn is still a raw material! It is very unlikely that a hand-spun yarn will be suitable for machine knitting, although you may find this can be done with a mini mill yarn, but please check in advance if this is what you are considering.

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