

Notes on Sheep Shearing and Maintaining the Quality of Fleeces

About Fleece

1. Normally the best wool is **lamb's wool** (but lambs may not be shorn in their first year unless you are prepared to have the shearer back in September or October), then shearlings, then young or barren ewes, then the rest, but quite old animals may have very good fleeces as much of the fleece quality is genetic. Unless lambs are shorn in the autumn, the fleece will be too short – it needs to be at least two inches long for processing.
2. **Longwool sheep** are best shorn twice a year if possible, and any fleece that is fine also risks matting and felting on the animal, which makes it impossible to process. Very matted or felted fleeces are rubbish and should be composted or used to mulch trees. Two shearings will result in a higher total weight of fleece each year.
3. **Winter shearing** with winter combs – possibly before housing or lambing – is becoming more frequent and the quality of the fleeces is likely to be higher in ewes than the summer shearing as they will not have just had lambs and finished lactating. A sheep will put on an inch of fleece in the first month after shearing and hardier breeds can be shorn in December, fed a bit extra (likely if in lamb anyway), given access to shelter in poor weather and will be well covered again before the real cold in January and February.
4. Although **genetics** provide the basic quality, fleece quality also reflects the **health** of the animal. Thus stress like lambing, lactating, worms, foot-rot, etc. will also affect the wool quality – the worst cases can include the sheep simply losing the fleece, but more normally there can be staple breaks, tender wool that just breaks if pulled, or general lower weight, lower crimp and lower quality.
5. It is vital not to include fleece which has received **pesticide** treatment – fleece from animals treated for flystrike or with other external poisons before shearing (unusual but occasionally done if very hot) should be excluded from the woolsacks. The normal rule is that fleece is not acceptable unless there is a minimum of three months between the date of treatment and the date of shearing. Thus using a dip or pour-on a couple of weeks after summer shearing will mean the ewes' fleeces will be fine for a winter shearing, if done, but any lambs' fleeces must be shorn off allowing for these dates.
6. **Avoid graffiti** 'art': crayon from raddles will wash out in processing, but most of the other markers, and particularly those associated with pesticides, will not. Spraying a large number on the flank ruins 50% of the best fibre on the animal: consider marking the heads or the haunches instead.

At Shearing

1. These notes are aimed at working within the normal constraints of shearing a large flock. Please remember to observe bio-security.



2. Unless you have plenty of experience, do not be tempted to shear your own flock: a good shearer will ensure the best welfare and the least poor quality with second cuts, etc.
3. Make sure you provide enough support and facilities for shearing, whether you do it yourself or have shearers in.
4. At shearing, ensure that the minimum of straw, hay, stubble or vegetation is present, either on the animals or in the shearing area.
5. Sort the flock as it goes into shearing – keep all rams, ewes, shearlings, etc. separated and this will make life easier. Always sweep the shearing board between shearing each animal.
6. Keep three or more woolsacks on the go: one for rubbish, one for really good fleeces and one for average fleeces (rams will normally be below average, as will older ewes, so the ideal would be to have two average bags, one for better and one for less good). Always keep coloured wool separate from white. If there are one or two really special fleeces (which is usual), keep them aside to sell to hand-spinners.
7. Do not include belly and crutch wool with the fleeces – either throw it away, compost it or put in the rubbish fleece sack.
8. If possible, when there is coarse wool on the back end of the sheep, pull the fleece in two and put the coarse stuff in the rubbish sack and the rest in the appropriate sack.
9. BWMB does not sort fleece, only grades it on the average for the whole fleece or the whole sack, but others will sort each fleece to get the best quality – one ram fleece amongst shearlings will risk ruining a batch of yarn and the price you get for your clip.
10. Shake out fleeces to reduce the amount of second cuts (which are useless as too short) – shearers tend to think they are making a good-looking sheep, and will go over longer bits again, but this actually reduces fleece quality: a sheep with an uneven hairdo is unlikely to complain, but your fleece customer will!
11. Mark the sacks with the different qualities as hand spinners, The Natural Fibre Company and even BWMB will pay more for better quality.
12. Although BWMB likes fleeces rolled (to take up less space), other local buyers will much prefer fleeces which have NOT been rolled. **Do not include** dags, brambles, branches, stones, bricks or the children as they are no use for making yarns and simply reduce the value of your clip. Baler twine bits should be avoided at all costs as they are almost impossible to remove and totally ruin the value of your fleece. You can use clean new baler twine to sew up bags, but this is risky too as they may be cut open in several places, which risks contamination with bits.
13. Keep notes of the tag numbers of sheep with particularly good or particularly bad fleeces and include this information when selecting for future breeding and flock management.

Prices

1. If you think fleece is a nuisance and only a welfare issue, it will be a problem for you, as you will get less quality by taking less care. At the least, you should aim

- for the value of the fleece to cover the shearing costs, which means you will have one welfare activity, which costs nothing.
2. Wool is a high performance, sustainable fibre, which can fetch good prices in its final form, but the transport, processing, design, marketing, etc. are all expensive and take time. A really good hand spinner will take an hour to spin 100 yards of yarn, which has to be plied. Working by hand, from raw fleece to a hand-spun, hand-knitted pullover (without dyeing) will take an efficient and competent person around 100 hours. Machines are obviously quicker, but need power, premises, employees and bureaucracy. None of this can begin without good fibre to start with and using these notes should help you to get the best value from your fleeces.
 3. It generally costs around £1 per animal to shear sheep (more for goats and around £15 for alpaca) and the weight of fleece is generally 2-7kg, depending on the breed. A long matted heavy fleece may weigh plenty, but it will not get as good a price as a clean, shorter one.
 4. BWMB prices set the norms, so you should never get less than this. BWMB pays in two payments, so if you can get all the money up front, and are working for the longer term you can afford to accept the same price from another buyer (especially if they collect).
 5. BWMB accepts that it is not the best market for all fleece, but it does like to keep statistics. Therefore it is worth informing them if you keep fleece aside to sell elsewhere – they support local value adding initiatives and everyone would rather the wool was used than wasted.
 6. A really good fleece can be sold for up to £5-10 per kilogram, depending on the weight, for hand-spinning and rare breeds can fetch even more. This will pay for 4-6 other animals to be shorn.
 7. Shearers will know about local buyers, spinners, etc. and a great deal of other information besides – it's worth asking and listening.
 8. BWMB prices range between 10p and 380p per kilogram at present. Poor quality fleece fetches less than 40p and the average for good clean fleeces is around £1.10 per kilogram. By sorting the fleeces at shearing, you may be able to get at least one sack at a higher price break, which is quite helpful in recovering costs.
 9. Coloured fleeces are generally not wanted by BWMB (although they have shown more interest in Jacob recently), but the rest of the market is interested, particularly if the fleece quality is good – so always ask The Natural Fibre Company or Cornish Organic Wool, or local hand spinners before sending to BWMB.
 10. Even mulch has a value! Dirty wool contains good nutrition for plants and composts quite slowly, so arguably is better than bark as mulch. It also works well at the bottom of runner bean trenches to hold the water.

Skirting, sorting and grading a fleece

1. Shake fleece to remove dust, short bits, second cuts, and loose vegetation.
2. Lay out flat on a table. Shearers use slatted tables, and The Natural Fibre Company uses one with fine netting – a worthwhile investment if you plan to do

- a lot of this! If not, a plastic sheet over the table will enable the fleece to be moved around easily and should be swept after each fleece. It is worth starting with pale fleeces and moving through to darker ones if you have a mixture, to reduce colour contamination.
3. Let the rejected bits just fall on the floor and collect them afterwards for use as mulch in the garden.
 4. If it is a loose fleece in locks, you cannot shake it out and a slatted or netted table (see 2. above) makes things easier. However, you should be able just to pick up the bits you want and leave the rest.
 5. Pull off all dags, and any larger pieces of vegetation and straw, etc.
 6. Pull off any felted, tangled or cotted areas (if you can pull apart the fibres, a machine will only chop them, which will reduce the quality of yarn)
 7. Pull off any very short, coarse or dirty fleece – this is less important when making felt.
 8. Pull off any areas contaminated with paint, dye or other colourants – again this is less important when making felt, depending on what effect you require. Raddle will wash out, but many of the dyes used to colour pesticides or for marking will not.
 9. You will probably now have reduced the total fleece by around 10%, and have removed most of the fibre around the edges.
 10. At this stage you can assess the fleece to decide whether it is all of one type or whether there is significant variation, and you can separate finer and coarser areas or sort by colour. With Jacob, for example, it is usually fairly easy to sort the main dark and light and the merged boundary areas form the third colour – it is not practical to sort by individual hairs!
 11. Consider whether the fleece is kempy or not and whether the kemp hairs are present everywhere or just on the chest, spine and back legs. Kemp reduces the quality, handle and softness of a fleece, but it is also characteristic of some breeds and a certain amount may make the yarn more distinctive to the breed.
 12. Grading is relatively straightforward at the simple level: you should be able to see what is coarser or finer and then check by feeling it – rub a few hairs from visibly different parts of the fleece between your fingers and you will begin to appreciate the variations. You can also lay them on a dark or pale surface, depending on the fleece colour, and spread them out to compare. To get a truly scientific result you need to go on a course or send the fibre away for analysis.
 13. As you do more, you will begin to appreciate the variety in colour, texture, crimp, lustre, staple length, lock formation, etc. of the many different sheep in each flock, even of the same breed! However, you should also be pragmatic and decisive and not waste time choosing between individual shades of grey, or locks or hairs – that way lays madness!
