

WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH THESE BIG, COARSE FLEECES FROM THE OLD RAMS?

By Stefania Sveinbjarnardottir

This is just what I was thinking a couple of years ago. I had three nice enough white fleeces from old (over 3 years old) rams, with really coarse tog. Knowing that the average spinner thinks in only one term, "soft", I did not think I had much chance of selling these as handspinner's fleeces.

I have several small rugs around in my house that I and a friend have made. They are all made from wool, some from Icelandic and some from other breeds' wool. I enjoyed making those and they wear really well. I also have noticed that some advanced spinners are starting to think out of the "hat, scarf and mitts" and even the "sweaters and socks" boxes. I even know some that think tapestry and rugs!

And that is just what I thought when I was looking at these rams' fleeces. I know that I will not have time to spin the yarn myself so I decided to try out a small woollen mill in Ontario and see if they could make some rug yarn for me from these fleeces.

The owners had never seen Icelandic wool before and looked a bit hesitant. However, I promised to pay for whatever they produced so they and I took the chance. I asked them to make tightly spun, three ply rug yarn from the rams' fleeces (I also took in some ewes' fleeces that were much softer). It took a few weeks until I got the call telling me that the yarn was ready.

I was a bit apprehensive when I got the yarn home and had washed it. The "rug" yarn was much softer than I had anticipated and quite a bit looser spun than I had expected. It also was thinner than I had hoped for. [In spinning terms what I got was 10 wraps per inch (wpi) and 3 twists per inch (tpi). You find wpi by wrapping the yarn around a ruler so that it lies in one layer with each wrapping of the yarn just touching the last wrap. Then you count how many wraps are on one inch. To find tpi, you measure the "bumps" of the yarn over 1 inch length and divide by the plies]. A tightly spun yarn would have had at least 6 tpi. So I decided to use this for socks, and a nice sock yarn it indeed made. But one can only knit so many socks until one is sick of sock knitting.



So I decided to visit my original idea of making another rug. I had so far done a felted one, a punch hooked one and a knitted one. My friend, Sandy, had made a latch hook rug (see Sandy's Rug, Newsletter Vo. 8, issue 3) from raw fleece. This time I decided to make a rug using cross-stitch in a canvas that has 4 holes to the inch. The yarn was much too thin for that so I used three strands and a huge plastic needle. One of the things I wanted to test was how this yarn would stand up to being pulled repeatedly through the holes in the canvas. I tested it going through 48 holes twice. By that time the yarn was starting to become thin so as not to cover the canvas well enough. That is more than regular commercial yarn would stand up to.

As I worked on the rug I really came to appreciate the yarn I was working with. The fact that it was

soft in spite of it being made from what looked like coarse fleece was explained to me as follows; when fine soft fibre is blended with long coarser fibre in spinning, the finer fibres tend to move to the outside of the yarn with the longer, stronger fibres making the core. This fuzzy outside part did a wonderful job of filling in the space while the core made the yarn strong and durable. I am sure as the rug gets walked on these fuzzy fibres will further fill out the rug and possibly felt a little giving further structural integrity to the rug.



I also had fun dyeing this yarn. I started with a little Kool-Aid which I found in my kitchen cupboard. Then I switched over to regular food colouring which I used like ordinary acid dye. I also dyed a little with regular acid dyes. The yarn took the dye wonderfully! The colours were bright and vibrant and since the tog and thel absorbed the dye differently the effect was very nice and enhanced the natural lustre of the tog.

As I said earlier, I found the yarn a little too thin. This was only because I had intended to fill out the big canvas. If I had intended to do a punch needle rug this thickness of yarn would have been ideal. The same if the rug hooking method had been used. As it turned out, using three strands of this yarn was just perfect. I ended up with a wildly coloured 22" x 50" rug that will cover three steps on my stairs.

So for your "old ram" fleeces, think rugs. They are fun to make and will serve for a long time to beautify your home. The strength of the coarse tog is perfect for rugs. As a base for latch hooking or cross-stitch you can use latch hook canvas, for needle punching Monk's cloth is ideal, for hooking, Cotton Warp cloth will do fine. If knitting the rug you should use a firm stitch such as linen stitch; when crocheting, a firm job needs to be done and if felting the rug should be firmly felted.

So don't despair. These old rams' fleeces have a quality that is not generally found in ewe's or lamb's fleece, superior strength and durability. Just what is needed for that rug.

Photo description: Multicolour top: Cross stitch; Middle top: Latch hooked from unspun wool; Striped top: Knitted; Natural coloured bottom: Felted; Multicolour bottom: punch needled.