



WASHING FINNSHEEP FLEECE *By Elizabeth H. Kinne Gossner*

Prized by handspinners, purebred Finnsheep grow some of the most luxurious soft wools and are a source of creative inspiration throughout the year. The transition from raw fleece to pristinely clean fiber can be accomplished in several ways. For processing in bulk there are carding mills which will efficiently clean and combine large volumes of fleece into a well-blended presentation.

However, for those who prefer to remain connected to individual fleeces, hand processing may be the better choice. Basic "scouring" is quite simple. As fleece grows and during shearing it is helpful to prevent contamination from burdock, hay chaff, etc. For cleaning, first skirt the fleece (remove undesirable areas such as manure, second cuts, and vegetative matter), then divide into smaller sections which will conveniently fit into soaking pots.

Fill a vessel with very hot water and then add about 1/3 cup of liquid dishwashing detergent (ex: Dawn or Joy). Stir. Gently place raw fleece into the vessel and push beneath the surface. You may crowd the fleece for this first soaking which will help retain heat. Cover if possible and allow to soak without stirring for about an hour.

While still warm prepare 2-3 pots of clear rinse water. They should approximate the temperature of the soaking bath to avoid shocking the wool. Next, simply take a handful of damp wool from the initial bath, squeeze out, and swoosh through clear water. Repeat this step with each successive rinse vessel. If lock tips are muddy they can be manipulated gently in the rinse process. Renew rinse waters as needed.

When the entire amount of fleece is rinsed it can be placed into a top-loading washing machine which has a spin only cycle to further drain out the water. Hang the wet wool on a clothesline or drying rack and if the day is sunny with a breeze, you may have beautiful dry fleece which is ready to use in a couple of hours.

This hands-on approach has the advantage of retaining individual lock character as well as color definition in patterned fleeces. An awareness of the individual sheep providing its wool can be a certain pleasure as we spin the precious fiber into our yarns.

Whether the preference is for glistening white wool or any one of the natural colors that our Finnsheep have to offer, this simple approach to washing fleeces gives us the ultimate creative opportunity.

