



## Spinning the Shirley Simpson Way: Part 2: No Frills Yarn

*A special article on spinning alpaca yarn, from Shirley Simpson.*

When I started learning how to spin way back in the late 1970's, alpaca and cashmere, regarded as luxury fibres, were usually only available in top form: a top being a thick, untwisted, rope-like commercial preparation. Thin strips are pulled from the top and spun, forming a fairly smooth yarn. Such preparations are quick and convenient to spin but they are much less exciting than handling your own fleeces. These have become very much more widely available to alpaca owners and handspinners within the last five years.

My early experiences of spinning alpaca were based on the traditional practices used for spinning wool. These entailed carding and combing. Carding requires a small amount of washed, opened fleece (up to about 4" in length) to be placed on a hand carder. This is gently stroked with a second carder until the fibres are straight. The carded web is rolled to form a fat cigar shape known as a rolag. Fibres are gently pulled from one end and twisted on a spinning wheel to form a single strand of yarn. Usually, two single strands of yarn are plied (twisted) together to form a woollen yarn which is characterised by its soft, open appearance.

Combing fleece produces a semi-worsted yarn; this is very similar in appearance to yarn spun from a top. A steel dog comb, (not too fine) is used to comb staples. This removes coarser, damaged fibres as well as vegetable matter. The combed locks are drafted into a roving of a thickness to suit the final yarn, which is then plied to form a more consistent, strong 2ply yarn. This is a much finer version of the top described at the beginning of the article. It has to be admitted that making rolags and rovings requires practice and some skill; in short, these preparations are time consuming.

Recently, I thought long and very hard about rolags and rovings as I looked at my collection of small hanks spun from differently coloured alpaca, each one of which represented a considerable amount of time and skill and yet, in terms of practical knitting yardage, I had achieved very little. Time for bolder action !

The thought of spinning directly from the fleece is way beyond the scope of many spinning manuals but for a clean, well presented alpaca fleece, with staples of 3" at least, this technique is very quick and easy. A quality knitting yarn should be the outcome.

Allow yourself some practice runs. Tear off a piece of clean fleece, 1-2ozs in weight. Select a fleece which has well defined staples. Open the tips of these with your fingers or the steel dog comb mentioned earlier. Hold the fleece in one hand and grip a single staple with the fingers of the other. Gently pull the staple to elongate it into a thin roving. As you do this a nearby staple will be caught up and joined to the original staple. Continue with this gentle pulling and extending of the adjacent staples. When you have drafted about a yard, pull this roving clear of the fleece and coil it around your hand, straightening and refining it as you do so. Store carefully. Be warned – cats, in particular, have a great fondness for a basket full of alpaca rovings.

Spinning this prepared fibre should be quick and uncomplicated. Join a single roving onto the leader attached to a bobbin on your spinning wheel. Draft the roving as you treadle, aiming for a soft twist. Too much twist instantly hardens the yarn. A fairly reliable test is to pull about 6"

of spun singles yarn from the orifice and let it twist back on itself. This will give you a good idea of the appearance and handle of the yarn you are spinning.

If the yarn is too soft (ie: it pulls apart and will not be sufficiently hard wearing for your needs), increase your rate of treading to put in more twist or, very slightly, reduce the tension (pull) on your wheel. Conversely, if the singles is over twisted and snarls back on itself as you spin, treadle more slowly or slightly increase the tension on your wheel. This has the effect of allowing the singles to be wound onto the bobbin more quickly before it becomes too twisted.

Most usually singles yarns are spun Z with the wheel turning in a clockwise direction. Two singles are plyed together for a stronger yarn. This is said to be S spinning with the wheel turning anti-clockwise. Once again, tension is important. When you have plyed a few yards allow a length of this yarn to hang loosely in a curve in front of the orifice. In an ideal world this length of yarn should neither twist to the left or right. If your plyed yarn does twist vigorously to the left or right slow down your treading.

Wind your yarn firmly, but not tightly, onto a skein maker. Using scrap yarn, put in a loose figure of eight leases to keep the skein intact when it is removed from the skein maker. Spray the skein thoroughly whilst on the skein maker, using warm water in a plant sprayer. Leave the skein to dry for 24 hours. The effect on the appearance of your yarn will be magical. Technically, this is called 'setting the twist'.

So, providing you have clean, high quality ,open fleece and the confidence to try spinning directly from it, this is a quick and successful method for producing knitting yarns. There is one more technique which has revolutionised my yarn output. This is drum carding. For many years I have thought that drum carders were cruel to fine fibres such as alpaca, cashmere and camel. I experimented. I put a thin layer of fine, clean opened woollen fleece onto the drum carder, followed by a thicker layer of prepared alpaca. I removed the carded batt , tore it in half and put it through the carder again. The fibre was not damaged and the wool and alpaca were blended. The very small amount of wool will give the alpaca just a touch of elasticity in wear. To spin from a carded batt, simply tear off strips down the length. I vary the width of the strips; for finer yarns I use narrower strips and for thicker yarns I use wider strips. Gently draft strips to required thickness for spinning. This yields very quick results.

I have kept my most exciting piece of spinning equipment until last. This is an electric drum carder which will produce batts of alpaca or wool weighing almost 4 ozs. I have had this magical machine for only a few months but it has vastly increased my rate of yarn production. This machine could present a group of alpaca owners with a business opportunity – handspun /dyed yarns for sale. I must stress that the alpaca fleece does need to be adequately prepared; sorted, washed and opened - by hand before carding. This electrically powered machine does not appear to adversely affect the fibre in any way.

I do not think it is possible to learn to spin from a textbook. However, once you can produce a continuous thread, no matter how lumpy and bumpy it is, some simple, straightforward help is always welcome. [The Essentials of Handspinning](#) by [Mabel Ross](#), (first published in June 1980 and frequently reprinted) is very well worth buying. There is a chart which explains how to convert the various thicknesses of your handspun yarns to standard machine spun yarns, together with knitting needle sizes in both imperial and metric.

### **Alpaca Scarf**

For these early spinning experiments try this alpaca scarf pattern. I hand knitted this scarf, using naturally coloured alpaca yarns spun to a double knitting thickness. A black commercial fringed yarn was knitted along each edge to provide a different texture. With the present great revival of interest in knitting there are many exciting new yarns to use as a foil to the matt softness of alpaca; one or two rows are usually sufficient in a design such as this.

The photographed scarf weighs just over 4 ozs (105 gram). It is 90 inches (225cm) long and is approximately 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches (9cm) wide. I used a circular needle 80cm long, size 6mm (English 4).

Method:- Cast on (fairly loosely) 300 stitches. Work in garter stitch (knitting every row), joining in additional yarns as required. Cast off loosely. Darn in ends.

This design is infinitely variable.

Moss stitch (seed stitch in the U.S.) also works very well.

### **Useful Addresses**

P. & M. Woolcraft. Tel. No: 01908 510277 [www.pmwoolcraft.co.uk](http://www.pmwoolcraft.co.uk)

Stockists of a wide range of spinning equipment and Essentials of Handspinning by Mabel Ross.

The Association of Guilds of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers.

Their main aim is to encourage, promote and teach these skills.

Secretary: Paddy Bakker,  
3, Gatchell Meadows,  
Trull,  
Taunton,  
Somerset. TA 3 7HY

Send an s.a.e. for a list of the Guilds in your area. I have found that Guilds spawn localised Spinning and Weaving Groups. Such groups may be less structured than Guilds. They will still be very helpful to beginners.

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