

One way to Wash a Fleece



by Deborah Robson

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My general washing practices take the potential for felting into account, and I use them with all types of wool. In this article, I have done my best to use a sequence of pictures from the same washing session, although I needed to insert a few non-sequential photos to fill in particular points. I'm also going to show and talk about at least one thing I used to do that I don't do any more, and why: your washing situation may require it, as it may require other adjustments along the way.

I'll also go into a whole lot of detail, because it can be unnerving to wash one's first fleece, and I think more detail may be reassuring as long as the novice fleece-washer keeps in mind that there are only two essential things to remember:

- ◇ Don't agitate the wool.
- ◇ Don't let the water cool off so that the dissolved stuff recongels on the fiber.

My goal is to remove the lanolin and as much dirt as possible without drying out or felting the fiber. During washing, I don't pay much attention to the small bits of vegetable matter that remain after skirting, except to note how much there is and of what type(s), for future reference. With few exceptions, it's easiest to remove vegetable matter when the wool is clean.

I make many choices that are very personal. I hand-wash in batches that let me see the wool as I'm working. I want to start getting to know the fiber at this stage, and I want to be able to ease out some of the dirt that might not be released if I were cleaning larger quantities or containing the fiber in bags (although I use bags in part of the drying stage).

There are myriad ways to clean wool. Some people prepare net-wrapped rolls of individual locks. Some wash in big bags. Some use the container of a washing machine as a basin. Some use methods similar to mine but with fewer rinses and washes (maybe they generally have cleaner fleeces to work with!—with some of the breeds I enjoy spinning, I don't have the

option of a super-clean starting point). All of these are appropriate choices for certain situations.

There is also the so-called suint method, which some people like a lot but I don't intend to try, again for personal reasons. The method is based on the idea that suint (sheep sweat) and lanolin can, under certain conditions, create their own soap-like cleansing substance. In practice, the method involves leaving raw fleece to soak outside in water, in an opaque covered container, in weather that produces heat for the mixture (it's not a winter activity in most places). The mix is allowed to stand for anywhere between a few days and a few weeks, during which time fermentation occurs and microorganisms, like bacteria, are encouraged to chemically break down the lanolin and remove it from the wool (water alone will remove the suint). After the chosen amount of time, the wool is removed from the suint bath, which is saved for future use. The bath is said to become even more effective as time goes on and it is re-used. The smell is universally remarked upon as being very strong. The drained wool is rinsed and dried. Those who use this technique remark on its ease (despite the smell) and the condition in which it leaves the wool (which doesn't sound very much different from the wool I've washed with my method).

So why no suint for me? I dislike strong, bad smells. (Barnyards are fine; feedlots and other odor sources of similar intensity are not.) I'm also allergic to mold and mildew, and thus would rather not invoke conditions that encourage the formation of similar substances. (I'll brew kombucha or ferment cabbage, but those are much more controlled experiences.) And while I'm willing to accept the risk of fleeting exposure to small amounts of agricultural chemicals (like sheep dip) when well diluted by water that is continually freshened, I'd rather not spend time in the vicinity of a solution that contains increasing concentrations of those unknowns. Some scientific studies examine the possibility of increased incidences of neuropsychiatric and neuropathic symptoms among users of organophosphate insecticides, such as sheep dip. Evidence is suggestive but not damning, yet I'd still rather not expose myself. There are too

many chemical and other adverse exposures over which I don't have control.

So: I like to wash wool in the way I'm about to describe. It takes some time, but not an inordinate amount. It gives me access to quite a bit of knowledge of the individual fleece while I'm working. There's a rhythm to it. It suits the layout of my house reasonably well. While there is a sheepy smell, as long as the manure has been skirted off before I get the fleece (which it had better have been!) I consider the odor inoffensive—even pleasant. And I find it rewarding to fully experience the transformation from raw substance to clean working material. Every time.

I'm going to overuse some words. One of them will be "gently." There's a reason I'm not editing out the repetitions. There's much less direct *work* in washing wool than you might imagine. Moving the water around is the big piece of it.

The entire normal sequence during which I need to pay attention takes on average between 1.5 and 2 hours, give or take a little. It involves three stages:

1. Soaking in clear water. (Usually 1 or 2 cycles.)
2. Soaking in cleansing solution. (Possibly 1 cycle, usually 2 cycles, sometimes 3.)
3. Soaking in rinse water. (Maybe 1 cycle, usually 2 cycles.)

Each cycle is about 20 minutes long.

When I begin with a comparatively clean fleece, I can complete washing in about 1 hour (one cycle of each type) and be completely done (on the racks and drying) in 1.5 hours—1.25 if I don't get distracted by anything else while I'm washing (that's rare; I almost always get a little distracted). Because I do other work while the wool soaks (things that can be accomplished in short chunks of time) and am not maximally efficient, I plan on having at least 2 hours available before I need to be somewhere else. An especially dirty fleece will require extra initial soaks or washes (stages 1 and 2). And I always end by giving the bathtub a thorough scrubbing when I'm done for the day.

While my goal for each cycle is 20 minutes, sometimes after the timer has rung I finish the other task I'm doing and don't change the water for 25, or maybe even 30, minutes. If I'm in a hurry and have a comparatively easy fleece to wash, the cycles can be 15 minutes long. ***Whatever the length of the cycles, however, the goal is not to let the temperature in the baths drop significantly throughout the entire wet-wool time.***



IMPORTANT NOTE 1: If the natural protective substances you are dissolving off the wool with the warm water and cleansing solution get redeposited on the wool, as will happen if the water cools off enough, the resulting—now chemically altered—substance can be difficult or impossible to remove. This is especially true for fine wools, like Rambouillet and Romeldale/CVM, but I don't risk it with any wool.

IMPORTANT NOTE 2: Felting occurs when you produce some combination of WOOL, WARMTH, WATER, AGITATION, and SOAP.* If you're cleaning a fleece, you can't avoid the wool and the water, and you probably want to use a cleansing agent, so what you have most control over is the temperature and — most important — agitation. Guard against agitation. A lot.

* Why might wool felt while it's still on a sheep? Let's see, I haven't had time yet to research this fully, but it might be because there's WOOL, body and environmental WARMTH, atmospheric MOISTURE, RUBBING or FRICTION from movement, and a natural SOAP-like substance produced when the lanolin and sweat salts that protect the fibers dissolve in the aforementioned moisture.

Aside: If you have especially hard water, you will get better results if you add a water-softening agent.

The Basic Plan

So here again is the outline of the washing process:

1. Soaking in clear water. (1 or 2 cycles.)
2. Soaking in cleansing solution. (Between 1 and 3 cycles.)
3. Soaking in rinse water. (1 or 2 cycles.)



Here's a newly acquired fleece with moderate dirt levels.



Here's a portion of that fleece after washing.

Pretty, isn't it? It will be scrumptious to spin, too.

Although I don't take meticulous care to preserve locks while washing, I don't jumble the wool around, so it ends up still pretty much in lock formation. I can then comb, card, spin from the locks, or do whatever else I would like. Admittedly, the fleece above is a Border Leicester, so the locks are easy to both see in a photograph and keep in shape during washing, but the general principle applies to any wool.

Part 1: Getting Started

First comes something I don't do any more:



When I was using dishwashing detergent for my washing, I heated water on the stove to raise the temperature in the baths, and carried lots of

boiling water from the kitchen to the bathroom. I'd worry about spilling (or dumping) the water every time I had to step over a sleeping dog to get through the hall. Plus it was a lot of work: filling and refilling the kettles, rotating which one I was using, hauling.

This was a major reason that I changed to using a cleansing aid that works at lower temperatures, like what normally comes out of the hot-water tap (about 125-135°F [52-57°C]). It made a huge difference in the time and effort required, and the wool is cleaner.

Supplies you will need

Second there is the matter of **containers** for washing, and this may be the part of washing-prep that involves the most creative advance thinking, but once you've solved it, you've solved it.

When I washed my first fleeces more than 40 years ago (!), I would run water into a bathtub, put in a whole fleece, and then start wrestling. I'd push the fleece all the way to one end of the tub and hold it there while I drained the water out of the tub or (slowly) let it refill from the faucet. It took longer. It's riskier than the process I use now—more chance of running water onto the wool, which encourages felting; more opportunity to mess up the lock structure; more pressure on, and potential agitation of, the wool while it's wet. I never got into trouble using that method, even when I washed star felters like Karakuls, but also don't want to work that hard any more. (Washing a *lot* of fleeces is still hard work. It just doesn't need to be made harder. Washing a little bit of fleece is no big deal at all.)

For small batches of wool, I have collected size-matched pairs of colanders and bowls from second-hand and outlet stores:



The pieces came from as many different sources. I learned not to count on memory to identify potential “matching” sets. I carried measurements with me from store to store as I collected. I still use these for small amounts of fiber, or small batches of varied fibers for sampling. The quantities they hold vary pretty dramatically, which is handy.

But for larger amounts of wool, I use [sifting boxes intended for use with cat litter](#). The pairs consist of a lower, solid tray and an upper tray with a perforated bottom. The pieces are shown here after a washing session, with the solid bits turned over so they'll dry quickly. You'll see these in action

throughout the images to come.



I have two different sizes. I found all of these at close-out stores. They actually come in sets consisting of two solid trays and one perforated one. As you'll see, I use the extra solid trays for temporary working space, although they're not essential. I haven't been able to find more of these sets recently, so if you can't locate such things you may need to consider what types of containers you can find or make that will do the same job. Just keep in mind that the part with the holes is the most important component. Water needs to be able to drain out fairly quickly without disturbing the wool.

Cast a creative eye around. I didn't know when I began my search that I was going to end up on a colander hunt, or going to every BigLots! store within fifty miles, whenever I had a reason to be in the area, to buy up its stock of cat-litter pans. I found the smaller size more recently at a Harbor Freight store. If desperate, I would start looking for two solid items that would fit together and would drill holes in the bottom of one of them. Be careful that what you choose is lightweight. It will be heavier with wet wool in it.

I also use, as you'll see when we get to the drying stage, **lingerie bags** (which I've gotten at dollar stores) and **stacking sweater dryers**.

Oh, and I do use **rubber gloves**. The sturdiest kind,

which I special-ordered through the local hardware store. I've worn out many lighter-weight ones. Gloves aren't essential. I don't use any substances in this process that I'm not comfortable putting my bare hands into (although I always wash my hands after handling grease wool). I'm just more comfortable putting on a pair for most of the operations, because the water's a little hotter than I like to keep my hands in for long and as you'll see I manipulate (but do not *agitate*) the wool. The gloves also keep my hands from drying out excessively when I'm doing a lot of washing.

For a **cleansing agent**, you can use any number of things, from hand-dishwashing detergent to shampoo to substances specially formulated for fiber. I would warn you away from laundry detergents. Most of them have a lot of additives and are harsher than is necessary. Hand-dishwashing detergents and shampoos raise a lot of suds that are hard to rinse out. Specially formulated fiber-cleaners have worked by far the best for me, and I like [Unicorn Power Scour](#) (the unscented version is Beyond Clean), which has been made not just for fiber but for *raw* fiber. It's low-sudsing, highly concentrated (not much is required), gentle on the fibers and my hands, and works well in water of moderate temperatures. It's important to use a washing aid that has been formulated for grease fleece and is as neutral in pH as possible.

Supplies List

- » *Colanders (for small batches)*
- » *Sifting boxes (for larger batches)*
- » *Lingerie bags*
- » *Stacking sweater dryers*
- » *Rubber gloves*
- » *Cleansing agent*

Deciding on how much wool to include in a batch

This is one of the ways I roughly gauge how much wool can go into a batch. The three pairs of trays that I'll be using (that's what fits in the tub) are under that bunch of fiber, but there's no water in them yet. I've just flung a layer of fleece across the dry trays. The goal is "full but not too full." I don't want to waste time, but trying to cram too much in makes it harder to get the fiber clean. Most fleeces can be done in one, two, or three batches (small, medium, and large fleeces). Only an enormous fleece will take more than that. The photo shows half a fleece.



The idea is that any extremely dirty (especially dung-caked) and matted fiber has been skirted off, by the seller or by me, before I start. Still, fleeces can be quite dirty—and this one was. Sheep live outside. Some of them live in climates that are wet and muddy (this one did). Some have fleeces that are full of windblown dust. While coated fleeces can be lovely, it can also be a source of great joy to release wool from its burden of dirt and grease and see it shine more brightly at each stage of the washing and drying sequence.

I can already see as I lay out the fiber which portions are going to need more attention. I'm sure you can, too!

Another way to determine how much wool to wash at a time is to pull off clumps and start laying them into the trays. The tray below can accommodate

a couple more clumps (it is, perhaps obviously, a different fleece than the one in the first photo).



If it's a type of fleece that's especially dirty at the tips, I may try to arrange the locks so the tips begin facing down (near the bottom of what will be the liquid).

Here's that second fleece, with full containers but not yet any water.



The amount ends up fluffy up to, or maybe slightly beyond, the edges of the trays.



Here's some Jacob, at the maximum amount I ever consider.



Less is more, although once the wool is wet the amount shown above can be easily immersed in the quantity of water the trays will hold.

Dirty wool: Less fiber in relation to the liquid.

Relatively clean wool: You can push the wool-to-water ratios higher.

Part 2: Washing

Basic water-filling or changing technique, demonstrated with the first (plain-water) soak

The procedure here will be followed for all of the changings of the water, although you'll see some variations on the theme as the photos progress (mostly because all the changes after this involve already-wet wool).

For this first run, I'm using warm, plain water. With a filthy fleece, I might start with one soak in COLD water and leave it for as long as overnight. (If the water isn't warm, the redepositing problem mentioned in post 1 doesn't occur.) I might even do two cold-water soaks for something full of mud that I want to salvage. However, for the most part we need the bathtub for family use at night and in the early morning, so if I do a cold-water soak it's most often just from when I get up to after I've had breakfast and am ready to get serious about washing some wool.

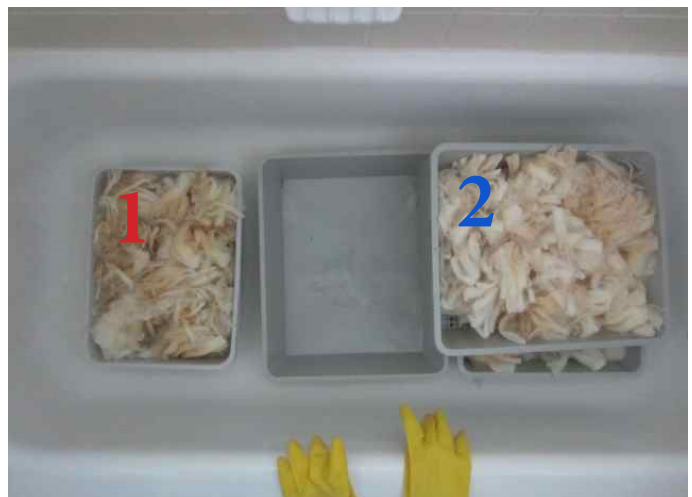
I need to get water into the bottom, solid trays without running it onto the wool (which counts as "agitation" and can lead to felting). By placing the wool-filled trays at right angles to each other, I can balance them all on the solid tray farthest from the faucet. I'm using two of the large trays and one small one here. All of this wool is still dry.



I run straight hot water into the tray nearest the faucet.



I put the matching wool-filled (perforated) tray into the water-filled base and just let it begin to sink on its own.



I slide that small tray to the middle position, lifting the available empty bigger tray over it, and fill that one in turn.



After settling the second wool-containing tray into that newly filled receptacle, I lift the remaining empty container tray to the faucet end, putting its still-dry wool tray crosswise on the first tray, which has now moved to the far end of the tub.



I always *slide* full trays away from the faucet and lift-to-move the empty (or recently dumped) trays.

Now all three trays have water in them, along with wool that has begun to get wet.



If you are nervous, you can leave the wool to sink into the water on its own. It will.

But I like to speed things along a bit and also to get gently involved at this point. So I put on my gloves and softly press the fiber so it's all immersed in the water.



Here are all three trays of quite a clean fleece taking their first soak in warm water.



I walk away and leave them for 15 to 20 minutes.



When I come back, I check to see how the dirt is dissolving by gently pressing down again.



Moving trays with wet wool

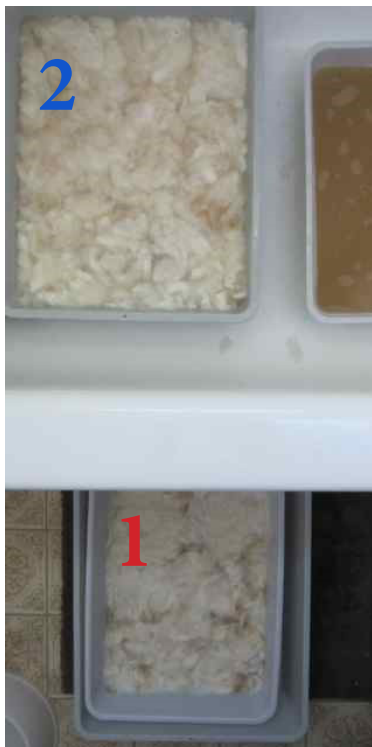
It's time for the second plain-water soaking. If the wool is quite clean at this point (the sample above is pretty clean), I might move directly to a washing bath, but usually I think that the more dirt I can remove with just water, the better.

So we're ready to prepare for the second soak. The upper trays are quite a bit heavier now, because the wool is wet. As I move things around, I have added the goals of not sloshing (much) water on the floor, and of draining out as much of the dirty water as possible before putting the wool trays into fresh water. The extra trays that came with the cat-box sets are about to come into play to provide more working space.

First I take one of the perforated trays and put it crosswise on its base. This allows a lot of the extra water to drain out. (If I'm using colanders, there's space at the end of the tub farthest from the faucet to just set them there to drain.)



Then I use one of the extra trays, set right next to the tub, to get the somewhat-drained first wool tray out of the way.



This is the point at which water can start making inroads on the bathroom, so I'm careful about the placement of the extra tray and the movements I use in transferring the wet-wool tray.

I continue to use that far-end tray to support the two other wool trays.



I dump out the dirty water by simply tipping each solid tray up on its side. (One thing I'd like to be able to improve about my system is being able to put the waste water on the yard and garden. That's not currently feasible.)

Then I refill the trays, sliding each over away from the tap as it is filled.



I set the wool back inside as each container tray is ready. (Interesting color shift between drained and soaking wool, isn't there?)



Ending up with the one original tray with dirty water in it, ready to be dumped so it can have its portion of wool (resting in the tray outside the tub) back again. The water ready to be dumped here is from the end of a second rinse, which is why it's not as dark as in the photo farther up in this section.



If you have really dirty wool, the tub after a first, or even second, rinse can look like the bottom of a riverbed. Here's a different fleece, and *far* from the worst I've ever seen (but take a look at how white that wool is already, from what you can see at the far right edge of the photo; differences like this happen dramatically in the first soak or two).



Reminder: Let soak for 15 to 20 minutes.



Adding the cleaning agent: washing

I do the plain-water preliminary soak once, twice, or three times. The condition of the wool, your patience, and sometimes just the available time will determine how many initial soaks to use. I don't expect fully clean water at *any* stage, and that's not what I'm going for. However, as the soaking and water-changing continues, the water will become clearer.

When it's time to add the cleaning agent, the technique differs very slightly. You could add it to each tray individually and do just as you did before, but I find it's more efficient to "treat" all trays with the scouring agent at the same time.

I set the trays crosswise to drain a bit, and empty the old water.



Because I need access to all three bottom trays at the same time, I stack the wool trays in the extra working space outside the tub—or stack them criss-crossed on one of the end trays, making sure I can still access an edge of the bottom solid tray.



In filling the solid trays, I continue to slide the full ones along the bottom of the tub. They're heavy, and I don't want to slosh and waste water.



When all three have clean water, I add a squirt of cleansing aid to each. It's in a pump dispenser that I balance on the edge of the tub while squirting. (I have the giant size. I use [Unicorn Power Scour](#) or Beyond Clean, which are specially formulated for use on grease wool. A little goes a very long way.) When I used dishwashing detergent, I might need a quarter-cup or so to each of the larger trays. With specialized wool-wash, I use a tablespoon or two (a half-squirt or so).



I gently swirl the water in the tray to distribute the cleanser. It's the same process if you use something like dishwashing detergent, but in that case you keep the swirling especially low-key because you don't want to raise any more suds than you have to (they're hard to rinse out).



A note on cleaning agents: Even though I'm wearing gloves, I won't use anything I don't want to keep my hands in. I look for low personal and environmental impact.

I re-settle the wool trays and press down to be sure the solution reaches all parts of the fiber.



15- to 20-minute timer. . . .

When I come back this time I examine the fiber with an aim to loosening up any clumps of dirt that remain. I wait until after the first washing soak so the cleanser has time to do some of its magic. What I want to do at this point is make sure I'm loosening up any clumps so the solution can get inside them.

I do not want to agitate or rub the fiber. I do want to open up stuck spots. I'll give you a series of photos of what that can look like.

I find a spot where, for example, the tips of a lock are holding some dirt. (Note that I'm not doing anything about that bit of grass just above my fingers. Unless it is *completely* unentangled with the fiber and just lying on top, trying to remove it at this stage will just mess up the locks. Wet wool tends to both stretch and hang onto what it's attached to. Dry wool lets go far more readily. The exception is burrs. They are best removed from wet wool, by pulling the wool away from the burr, rather than the burr from the wool.)



Lightly pinching my fingers on the tip of the lock, I slide them past each other. I'm not rubbing. I'm lightly compressing—with the intention of loosening the *dirt* more than of manipulating the *fiber*. I do this when the lock is submerged. It works best that way: quickest and most thorough.



Here's what the same tip looks like when I'm done:



You can still see a little darkness from the dirt, but it's much more diffuse. *Less is more.*

Then I change waters and add *roughly half* as much cleansing solution to the next bath. (If the fleece is caked in dirt, I'll use a little more cleanser all along and may do three washes.)

Flipping is definitely optional

Occasionally, in order to get at the tips that I've placed in the lower part of the bath water at the start of this all or because I simply want to see the whole range of the fiber, I'll gently place my hands above and below the mass of wool and flip it over like a pancake. Sometimes I drain and flip; sometimes I flip while the wool is in the water. It's always a delicate motion, and I don't by any means always do it. The risk is that I'll lose lock formation. The

technique is most useful with Down and meat-breed wools, which are most likely to have badly dirt-caked tips and where maintaining lock formation is least likely to be successful or desirable in any case.

Here's a batch of a type of fleece that this treatment (extra soaks and wash baths, tip manipulation, and flipping) was made for:



Yes, it washed up beautifully! That's just the first soak up there. You'll notice, however, that in this situation I only used two of the big trays. That gave me room to move the trays around without using the extra space outside the tub; I just didn't want that much grubby water having an opportunity to spread. (After any washing session, the tub is exceptionally clean because it gets a full [Bon Ami](#) scrubbing.)

Take a look at the way the locks are sitting in this series of photos and you'll see that I've flipped the batches:





I delicately re-distribute the wool in the baths after flipping. That's most obvious on the small tray, where I've also already loosened the dark areas (stuck tips) that were revealed by the flipping.

I do two soaks with clean water at the rinsing end of things. Some people use rinsing aids as well at this point. I don't, although I have no feelings either

way about that. I do two final rinses because I want to make sure all that's left at the end is wool and water. I'm not looking for an excruciatingly uniform result. I'm looking for a point when I'm convinced that any "dirt" that remains is *clean* "dirt." Sometimes wool will be slightly discolored by minerals in the soil. There are all sorts of reasons it won't look like it's been washed to sparkling and colorless homogeneity. That's all okay. The mud, dust, grease, and suint are gone.

It's ready to get dry.

By the way, if you need to go walk the dog or something while the wool is in its final rinse, you can. There shouldn't be anything left on the wool to cause problems if the water cools off, although I do like to move it along to the drying phase without delay.

Part 3: Drying

We'll return now to the fleece used for most of the washing photos. It's been through its final rinse and is ready to start the drying portion of the activity.

This next part goes fast.

It's time for the lingerie bags. I put each wool tray crosswise on its container tray to start draining. Then I tip one wool tray so a corner is inside a lingerie bag and let the wool slide from the rigid tool to the flexible one, offering encouragement (often just by shaking the washing tray) as needed. I zip the bag shut.

er tray. It will drain out when I lift the bag. I lightly squeeze the bags just a little so they aren't dripping wet.

I'll often use the smallest solid tray to collect the wool-filled lingerie bags, and then to carry them downstairs to the washing machine, which I use as a centrifuge to get out a good portion of the water.



If I'm going to do another washing sequence immediately, I'll save the final rinse water and use it for the first soak of the next batch. That bag up there is probably sitting directly in the water of the contain-

I have a top-loading washing machine with a spin-only cycle. I sure don't want to have water running directly onto my wool at this point!

I put the bags in and distribute their weight relatively evenly around the tub, make triply certain that I'm selecting "spin-only" from the dial, and then let the machine do its work.



(If you have very sharp eyes, you may be wondering if this has suddenly turned into a Jacob fleece. It has.)

In medieval times, when there were no washing machines, there were spin-only cycles. They were found out of doors next to a wall or a fence with a shallow hole at about waist height. A bag or basket of wool would be tied to the middle of a long stick. One end of the stick would be stuck into the [hole](#), and the power source (a human) would hold the other end of the stick and move it quickly in a big circle, causing the bag to swing around the stick and the water to fly outward. This was called [wuzzing](#). (I wonder if, when this was done in the summer, kids ran through the “sprinkler”? Or if teenagers were sent outside to expend some of their excess energy by providing the wuzzing power? I wonder if there were ever wuzzing contests?)

If you don't have an appropriate washing machine and don't feel like putting together a wuzzing arrangement, you could seek out a big salad spinner at the thrift shops while you're looking for your washing containers, or you could roll your wool in an old terrycloth towel like a jellyroll and then squeeze some of the water out into the towel. If you truly have no resources for getting water out, you can just lay out the wet wool and it will dry, although it will take longer. Although I still have my spin-only washing machine, I ultimately invested in a centrifugal spinner, kind of like the machines used in locker rooms to spin out wet bathing suits. Mine is a Nina Soft Spin Dryer, and they can be found at www.dharmatrading.com and www.laundry-alternative.com. It's terrific. I have found that if I put the wool (in lingerie bags) into the spinner and let it sit and drip-drain for a few minutes before I start the machine, the load balances more quickly.

In any case, the next thing you want to find is a place where air can circulate around the wool. Ideally it will be out of direct sunlight and not near a fire. The free air circulation is the most important part of drying; heat and sun exposure can damage the wool (especially now that you have removed its protective coatings). The damage might be slow, but why risk it?

One bag- or tray-full covers about half of one of my stackable sweater dryers, so here are the first two batches in one layer:



(Note the card identifying which fleece this is. I always think I'll remember, but I nearly always remember that's a mistaken idea.) Here's the third of the three bags' worth on a second dryer, stacked over the first:



The wool in the big mesh bag to the left is clean—probably the earlier batch from the same fleece, waiting for the rest of it to come along. At the bottom right, in plastic, is a raw fleece needing to be taken upstairs and doused in water.

At a moderately busy time, there are four drying racks stacked on the guest bed (potential visitor be warned), one propped on a towel over on the left, and several fleeces in large mesh bags almost ready for labeled-clean storage and several more in plastic, as I received them, needing the whole treatment. Yes, that's a fan on the bed. It's mostly for household air circulation in the summer, but it can also speed wool-drying when necessary. I currently have twelve stackable drying racks of the same type, and sometimes I use them all. Lack of drying racks can be the bottleneck in wool washing. (Spreading the wool out on towels works, but with less air circulation it again takes longer to dry.)



During the drying time, I sometimes flip over the batches of wool. It's not necessary, but can speed the process just a bit. I think mostly I do it because I like to say hello to the wool again and admire it from another angle.

This is what happens when I have to leave to teach and some of the wool isn't quite dry.



Air circulation is key. The fact that the hotel's air-conditioning unit was near the window was completely irrelevant. I turned the fan on low/no-cooling and the wool, which I rotated when I thought to do so, was fine by morning.

Sorting the wool

Some of you will have noticed that I don't sort the wool for quality before I wash it. If I were dealing with one or two fleeces at a time for my own use, most likely I would, putting the coarser or dirtier bits in one pile and the finer or cleaner in another. However, most of the wool that I wash will be distributed to participants in my workshops—and I have, at any given time, a dozen or two fleeces that need to be washed and stored and then packaged and then. . . .

The storage and fussy labeling issues alone would be insurmountable if I sorted before I washed, and when I do make up packets for classes I try to grab different types of fleece for each bag, so the people in the workshops get a sense of the range of possibilities from a breed. I could do that more methodically if I sorted, but I'd also go nuts.

If I do decide to use a portion of a fleece for myself, I find it simple enough to spread the clean wool on a sheet and, by touch, pull out sections that feel compatible with each other.

Your needs and procedures will need to be tailored to fit each other, as mine are.

The big points:

1. Don't worry.
2. Don't agitate.
3. Don't let the water cool off too much between baths.

So you find it hard to believe me when I say some really dirty wool can clean up quite nicely?

Note the different textures of the wools in the next four photos. They are all white (to make it easy to see their basic form) and they are of several different types. None of these was an especially clean

fleece. Certainly none was coated (I get some coated fleeces, but mostly not). The Down wool (the second photo) has rather a lot of vegetable matter in it (typical!), which will mostly drop out as it's picked in preparation for spinning.



Will those formerly very dirty wools truly make nice yarns?

In my opinion, yes.

This is Rouge de l'Ouest, a meat breed, which arrived with characteristically dirt-tinged tips, and a fair amount of grunge farther down the staples. It washed up pretty well, leaving slight discoloration at the tips. The yarn looks just fine.



I mentioned that the washing technique I use works for all types of wools, including those inclined to felt or to end up sticky (because they carry a lot of lanolin) or to otherwise be difficult. Here's some Romeldale:



Every one of the fibers I've shown here—and all the fibers I cleaned for [*The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook*](#), which was everything that came to me in raw form—was washed with this method.

As I said, the results are delicious to work with.

In sum

Spinning from wool you have carefully washed and prepared by hand is like eating fresh-picked, tree-ripened apricots, still warm from the sun.

Haven't tried it yet? Do. You don't have to wash all the wool you spin. I don't. And sometimes in the winter I buy hydroponic tomatoes, too.

You can read more of Deborah Robson's writing at <https://independentstitch.com>.

Remember This Fleece?



This is the fleece I showed in the first woolly image of part 1, about how to figure out how much fiber will fit in a batch. Dirty, wasn't it?



The other half of that fleece was even grubbier.

Here's how that second half progressed through the baths.

I didn't record precisely where I was in the process when I snapped the photos, so my dividing points between plain-water and cleansing baths may not be exact, but I'm guessing that because of the extreme grunge I gave it three initial soaks.



Then I added the Power Scour for three washing soaks, including a flip. This was, indeed, dirty wool.



And two final rinsing soaks, but just one photo.



At this point, I assigned responsibility for the remaining discoloration to mineral staining from the dirt. That sort of thing isn't likely to be gotten rid of without serious chemical intervention, which I'm not willing to do, and I know that the finished yarn will look fine (believe it or not—sample pictures to follow later in this post).