

Heritage Sheep Breed FIBER PROFILE



THE LIVESTOCK
CONSERVANCY™

Barbados Blackbelly

A hair sheep

You'd think such an elegant and beautifully colored sheep would have interesting fiber to spin. While the Barbados Blackbelly's fiber *is* fascinating, using it as a textile material requires some perseverance and a lot of imagination.

The breed developed on the Caribbean island of Barbados, starting in the 17th century. While its originating genetics are only beginning to be teased out, studies indicate closer proximity to breeds from Spain and Portugal than they do to those from Africa. This relationship, however, does not show up in its coat.

Barbados Blackbelly sheep are covered with very coarse hair that mostly runs between ¼ inch and 2 inches (6 and 50 mm) in length, with a short undercoat of wool. Colors for the hair fall in the light to dark brown spectrum with excursions into reddish tones; the undercoat is lighter. The rams have a mane formed of unusually long hair. The undercoat should shed out completely every year, and combing at the time when it loosens up should yield a separated woolly component that has a moderate amount of crimp.

Barbados Blackbelly may be one of the most challenging sheep-grown fibers to spin. The

Not to be confused with the American Blackbelly, a newer breed developed from mouflon and Barbados Blackbelly.



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hair is stiff and slippery and resists twist. Work slowly with gentle take-up and you can produce yarn.

The upper strand in the photo is mostly undercoat and some hair. The lower strand is entirely hair.



lock and yarn photos reproduced to the same scale



lower photos © Deborah Robson