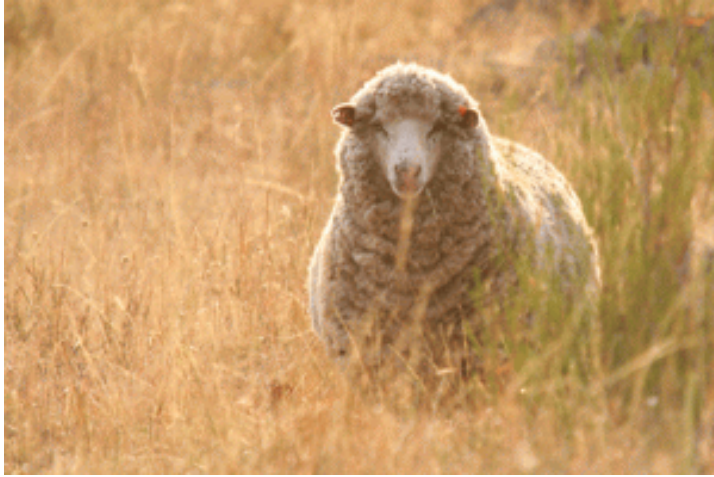


Focus On Fiber Series: Merino

March 9th, 2010 by talia



©Marj K of flickr

Introduction:

Who hasn't heard of Merino wool? It is one of the wools that have become a household name. Non-fibery-type people even seek it out when shopping. Synonymous with softness, merino is the most popular wool on the planet! How did this come to be? Let's take a closer look at our friendly merino sheep.

History of Breed:

According to Margaret Stove in her fabulous book, *Merino: Handspinning, Dyeing, & Working with Merino & Superfine Wools*, merino sheep originated in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates where the Garden of Eden was reputed to be. The Phoenicians spread merino sheep to North Africa where the Berbers became their shepherds. The Moors brought the breed to Spain where the aristocracy became enamored with the flock. Their wool became highly prized and guarded. The exporting of merinos was punishable by death.

In 1765, exportation was allowed and the first flocks made their way to Saxony (East Germany). In 1768, Silesia was fortunate to import merinos as well. Louis XVI developed his famous stud farm of Rambouillets from the Infantado sheep of Austria. Merinos were introduced to England in 1791 with little success. However, Captain John MacArthur purchased a number of merinos and influenced the Australian wool industry.



Picture of Champion Merino ram at 1905 Sydney Sheep Show.

Merino was introduced to the USA in 1802, mostly in Vermont. In the 1850s, French merinos were also imported to North America giving us Debouillet merinos.

The first flock of merinos brought to New Zealand ended up being eaten. In 1834, John Bell Wright brought his flock, which prospered.

Breed Characteristics:

Merino sheep are known for their incredibly dense heavy fleece and high grease content. Both sexes may be horned. They are a handsome sheep with clean white faces and skin folds at the neck. Merinos are the most populous sheep on the planet. Their average fleeces have a weight of 7 – 13 pounds with an average staple length of 2 ½ -4 inches.

Tightly crimped merino fiber can be incredibly soft, as low as 11.5 microns! Jane and Nola Fournier state in their book, *In Sheep's Clothing*, that all the fine wool breed sheep have been crossed at one time or another with merino. Merino is next-to-the-skin-soft and is suitable for baby garments, lace, and almost anything else you may want to put on bare skin.

Washing:



Yeah, it's that sweet!

We learned our method of washing merino sheep from workshops with Margaret Stove. If you are not familiar with her work, please pick up her books listed in the resource section at the end of this article. Merino wool can lose as much as 45% in weight after washing due to the high grease content. It also felts very easily and great care must be taken to prevent this unhappy occurrence.

Margaret Stove is known for spinning lace weight merino and as such she washes wool for her projects lock by lock.

1. Take a finger thick lock of merino and hold the staple firmly by one end. It doesn't matter which end you start with, as you will repeat the process from the other side.
2. Immerse the end in the hottest water your hands can stand, rub the wet lock vigorously on a bar of pure soap. I have done this and it will not felt.
3. Immerse in hot water again and squeeze gently to remove water.
4. Repeat with opposite side of lock.
5. Leave to dry on a towel and do not handle until dry. It should dry quickly.

If you want to wash larger quantities of merino at once, you can follow our instructions for scouring raw fleece. The thickness of the locks should remain the same as described above, only a fingers thickness. You will want to use several mesh washing bags. We use long thin ones to keep the locks in place. Use plenty of soap and be very careful when handling your fibers. You may need to repeat the process for very greasy fleece and if your water temperature is not hot enough. Squeeze your fibers after final rinse and lay flat to dry.

Resources:

Anderson, Enid, *The Spinner's Encyclopedia*, 1987, David and Charles Publishers, Devon, UK, 288pp, ISBN: 0-7153-8794-4

Fournier, Nola and Jane, S, *In Sheep's Clothing, A Handspinners Guide to Wool*, 1995, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, 222p, Hardback (ISBN 1-883010-11-X)

Ponting, Kenneth G, *Sheep of The World*, 1980, Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, 155pp, ISBN-13: 978-0713719414

Stove, Margaret, *Merino: Handspinning, Dyeing, & Working with Merino & Superfine Wools*, 1991, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, 109pp, ISBN: 0-934026-71-8

Wikipedia, Merino, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merino>, Retrieved on March 9, 2010.