

Why do you do what you do? Fleece and Fibre Lovers Tell All

Janette: I think it's fun. And I love my sheep. I wanted sheep that would produce yarn-quality fleece, so I got Romneys. I used to have meat breeds but it was such a waste, burning the fleece. Some of it I used, in duvets, sleeping bags and pillows, but now I process the fleece. I dye, spin, weave and knit. My sheep are easy for me to handle, they keep the grass down, and it's a joy just looking at them in the field.

Pat: When I demonstrate spinning, people ask me what are those little black bits? They mean in the fleece that I'm using and I tell them they're creep crap which is what my kids used to call it. It's the bits of sheep manure that hasn't been picked out because I don't wash my fleece before I spin it. It's called "spinning in the grease." I asked myself why I do it this way and it's because with all the lanolin still in the fleece it holds the twist better as it goes onto my spinning wheel. You have more control. And I love the smell of the fleece, it's a wild smell.

Anna: I saw a need locally for fibre processing and when the mill came up for sale I jumped at it. It was something I could do, and I love fibre. I've been a handspinner since the late eighties. I enjoy the whole process of running the mill, it's satisfying work, and it's interesting to see who brings in what kinds of fleece. Some of it is so gorgeous I wish I didn't have to give it back, but I do...

Pat M: I fell in love with alpacas in New Mexico. Then when we took a trip to Vancouver Island and stayed at a B&B that had mini llamas I fell in love all over again. These were something we could afford so we moved over here, had a complete lifestyle change, bought mini llamas and took in some rescues. We hadn't known how gorgeous the mini llama fibre was – there's not as many guard hairs as on the big llamas – and although we'd just planned on having a hobby farm we now process the fibre into rovings, rolags and yarn. And we don't throw anything away; the extra fibre makes good compost and I line my hanging baskets with it instead of using moss. With eighteen animals, the farm is a huge undertaking and a challenge, but we love it.

Michele: I teach 4H Fibre Arts so the kids will have skills they can go back to at different points in their lives. Weaving and knitting are physical and tactile, and it's fun to see kids focussed on knitting needles or a shuttle instead of on a cell phone.

Cathy: Working with my hands feels good. I sit at a desk for most of my work so when I get a chance to dye yarn or weave or knit it I grab it. It's not just that though. It's partly that I feel a continuation of doing what some of my ancestors did in Scotland, way back. Working with fleece and fibre is a comfort, and it feels familiar. And when I joined the local guild I felt completely at home, with all those women embracing their spinning and weaving, and embracing me and my efforts.

Martha: Cotswold is a rare breed and I wanted to help keep the old breeds alive so I purchased my first sheep from the Rare Breeds Association. My sheep are intelligent and pretty, each one has its own personality and sometimes a little attitude. They produce wonderful meat and wonderful fleece, and they're just very nice to live with. Very calm. You get so attached and end up keeping the old girls, and

I've got too many sheep but they're amazing. I wash the fleece and dry it in the sun, then when I pull it apart it's like clouds of silk. I love wool! Every year I sell some breeding stock and I recommend that if you want to get into sheep, get a rare breed - you'll be helping to conserve the world's biodiversity as well as having wonderful animals.

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These quotes reflect just a mere sampling of the fleece and fibre resurgence in the Cowichan area. It may be an age-old process but it is thriving in our midst, and it's helping keep the vitality of our agricultural heritage alive. Woven and knitted goods are passed along as legacies in families, and fleece and fibre pulls community together through guilds, fairs and festivals.