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From Sheep to Shawl

“This is Yureka!” A woman held up a skein of wool dyed the colours of a summer sunset. I was at my first meeting of the Tzouhalem Spinners and Weavers Guild not knowing anything about spinning or weaving, but felt at home in this group of women who were introducing me to their art. We were a diverse group with the commonality of wool. From sinking our fingers into a thick fleece, to drafting out sticky fibres to spin, wool just makes us feel good. Whether we knit, weave, crochet or felt, creating beautiful, utilitarian goods seems innate.

The woman who held the skein pulled a large knitted swatch from her basket and passed it around. Ooohs and aahhs went up as each woman was handed the wool. “Is this Yureka too?” someone asked. “Oh, Yureka is so soft,” cooed another as she stroked the swatch along her cheek. I’d knitted a few items over the years but had never taken note of the brand of yarn. There had been a lurid synthetic yarn in the eighties called Phentex, but outside of that I could not name any. One woman giggled as she was passed the swatch and said, “What a fantastic fleece for her very first.” Ah...

After that, I hung out with guild members and sheep farmers and learned the process - sheering, skirting, picking, washing, teasing (not the sheep), dying and spinning. Guild members love to explain these terms as well as do demos and show adults and kids how to spin,

weave and felt. The Cobble Hill Fair, August 27, and the Cow Ex, September 9 – 11, are great places for this, and from September 23 – 25 there is the Weaver’s and More sale at the Maritime

Museum (stunning handmade goods), and the Fleece and Fibre Festival in Cobble Hill on October 16 (oodles of items and paraphernalia galore) – the valley is full of fleece and fibre, and plenty of sheep too.

Small-scale agriculture and its offshoots give us superior products and a personal tie to the animals and producers, and to the land and seasons. How else would we have a chance of meeting the sheep who produced the wool, of seeing the animals on a website or knowing that Brown, for instance, enjoys a scratch behind the horns and Yureka prefers to be petted under the chin. Baaa.

Author bio:

Catherine J. Johnson, local writer, weaver and lover of sheep.