

HOW TO WASH RAW WOOL IN YOUR WASHING MACHINE

by Barbara Ann Muret, "Wooly Ways"©

How to wash raw wool is one of the most frequent subjects I get letters about. It is simple enough. The basics are this: Hot water is **not** bad, it is the movement of the wool in hot water that damages it. Washing machines are great for doing wool—it is the “turnstile” (the spiral column in the middle of the washing machine) that does the damage. Please read all the way through this article before beginning so that you understand your choices and “the whys” of handling the wool this way. The great part is there is very little personal handling of the wool, it is clean, fast, and won’t hurt your washer.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Fill washer with **HOT** water
- Add detergent as if for a very dirty load of jeans (regular laundry detergent is fine)
- Allow the washer to start agitation (swishing), for a few minutes or until the detergent is dissolved
- **TURN OFF WASHER**
- Add wool, several pounds is fine, push into water with broom handle, do **not** pack it in, allow it to be loose
- Allow to soak for an hour or two, until the water is lukewarm, poke with broom handle a few more times
- Turn the water (while off) to the **DRAIN/SPIN ONLY CYCLE**, turn “on” allowing it to remove all excess water
- **STAY WITH MACHINE**, allow it to refill with warm/cool water, **DO NOT ALLOW TO AGITATE**
- Poke gently with broom handle, do not stir, simply allow water to enter trapped areas
- With machine off, turn to drain/spin only cycle, turn on
- With machine off, turn to spin

only cycle one more time and turn on

• **YOU MAY NEED TO REPEAT THE LAST THREE STEPS IF WOOL IS EXCESSIVELY DIRTY—**

I prefer not to unless circumstances are extreme, the less you work with it wet the better loft and condition it will have.

THAT’S IT!

LAY OUT ON A TOWEL TO DRY, the spin cycle will remove the water to a barely damp state and the wool will dry fairly fast. Once in a while, flip the wool over so the damp wool on the bottom can get air. Sweater racks and clothes drying racks are great for this! They allow the air to reach the top and bottom at the same time, however, it will still dry faster if you give it a turn and a flip. Resist pulling it apart or handling it while it is wet.

People who do a lot of wool washing like to build simple drying racks, like shelves without boards on them...then stretch chicken coop wire or other inexpensive wide mesh across the shelf. I purchased some collapsible plastic coated “laundry racks” from the “J.C. Penney Catalog” and they have lasted a long time with no sign of ever “wearing out.” Since I use them constantly, they are simply handy. They have wheels and I use a special drying room with heat lamps and a dehumidifier (you have to remember I do hundreds of pounds this way!). I like that I can move the racks around the room and put the most damp wool or rush order closest to the drying lamps (I use heat lamps as for chicken brooders). For home use it strikes me these would be pretty practical, because you could use them for folding and stacking your laundry (novel idea, just like they show in the catalog) ...when you aren’t doing wool. The

important thing is, you don’t **NEED** anything special. It’s how *you* handle the wool. The washing machine simply allows you to skip all of the messy, dripping, dirty steps we used to think was necessary.

NOW FOR DE-BUNKING THEORIES

It is O.K. to wash wool in hot water if you **do not touch it while it is in hot water**. Any movement, no matter how minor, can “felt” tangle, encourage shrinkage and cause problems. Simply allowing wool to rest in hot water will not damage it. If you were to take it from cold water to hot water or the reverse, the shock would cause shrinkage. Hot water itself, at the temperature we do our laundry, is not a problem. Wools are usually dyed at 212°, which is just below or at the point of simmering, certainly much hotter than your laundry hot water.

You need the hot water to cut through the lanolin and remove the grease, therefore, the dirt is absorbed and trapped by the grease. Most sweaters truly left in the natural lanolin are washed in cold water, it is true. But the sheep are raised in grassy knoll areas with very little dirt and you will see a marked difference in the cleanliness of the yarn (color of white for instance) if you should ever decide to dry clean it or wash it in a manner that removed the lanolin. Although most deny it because it removes the romance, most lanolin enriched wool yarns and sweaters are cleaned and sterilized lanolin is put back into the wool. There are exceptions. But the truth is, as if you were cleaning bacon grease from a frypan...cold water does not remove grease and grease holds dirt.

The removal of the dirty water while it is still warm is a vital fact. Because the lanolin will tend to

settle back down into the fibers as the water reaches a “cool” temperature. It depends on your sheep and area in which you live. Some lanolin is very malleable while some is very sticky. Also, we all have preferences on whether the lanolin (or how much lanolin) is left in the wool. One valid note—lanolin attracts moths, they love it. The encyclopedia claims that a moth antennae can “smell” up to a mile! It may be a consideration in whether you wish to leave lanolin in your wool.

About “MESH BAGS” ...There is a long-time theory that wool must be washed in small amounts (a few ounces at a time) and in small lingerie-style mesh bags. Actually, the wool does not get as clean in fine mesh, because the water does not flow as freely and the wool tends to wad up. However, if you are being very finicky about each and every individual lock of wavy staying singular ... yes, they will not be moved as much if washed in a bag. But you must still use the same method listed. Do **not** simply turn on the washing machine! The reason they help is that you are not “pulling” the wool out of the washer. So with delicate handling, I maintain that you can still get the same effect and cleaner wool without the bags.

BLEACH & WHITE WOOL ...It is a point of view of how white wool should be. Different breeds of sheep have a different whiteness to their wool. If it is not the nature of the wool to be sparkling white, no amount of washing will change it. Some wools are actually a lovely antique cream by nature. Likewise wools with stained tips. The sun has melted the lanolin away from the tips and given a natural antiquing, like a suntan—except it is yellowed. In crafts some people love this and some don't. It is not a defect. Coated sheep generally do not have this problem, and it is certainly less evident in areas without hot summers. Whitening agents can be used in the wash or rinse process when cleaning the wool. Chlorine bleach is very caustic on the wool fiber and is not recommended. Used

sparingly and not soaked for long periods, it will whiten. Most frequently (it depends on the sheep breed), the wool reacts by actually yellowing all over. Non-chlorine bleaches used for colored clothes and permanent press laundry are safe for wools. Read the labels in your grocery store. You can always experiment with small batches of your wool in the kitchen sink.

ANTIQUE NATURAL COLOR of softness to lessen the yellowing of the tips to the rest of the wool, if you wish to use it “natural white”, which is easily obtained by allowing the rinsed wet wool to soak overnight in leftover coffee you've saved in the fridge, or tea. It will take more quickly if heated on the stove, in the oven, or even the microwave.

SEPARATING LOCKS TO STAY IN SINGULAR WAVES: ALWAYS SEPARATE BY PULLING APART AT THE TIPS. Whether separating large amounts or just a little bit...handle by taking a hold of the tips of the wool pieces. Take one small lock and separate it from the rest by pulling it away; hold the tip. Then pull it apart from the bottom (the blunt end where the sheep was given its clipping) and you will want to pull by the tips. If you are “picking” out for a drum carder you will want to pull by the base.

BUT WHAT ABOUT ALL THIS OTHER STUFF? The final unfortunate answer on “dirt” is that straw, bits of feed, burrs, grasses, DO NOT WASH OUT. Larger things can be handed picked out, the others can be “shook” out somewhat before and after washing. But, for the most part, you have to start with quality, clean fleece to have quality, clean washed fleece. It is the manner in which the sheep is raised and cared for. If you are the owner of a fleece (raw wool straight from the sheep), that has “a lot of stuff in it”...the best approach is to sort it before washing.

The worst of the “foreign matter” will be in the areas of the back of the neck, the tummy and sometimes right down the center of the back. If you pull shake the wool to encourage the matter to fall out

on its own; then lay it in a clean area and sort it...taking the areas with the most and putting it in a bag, the areas that aren't too bad and putting it in a bag, and the clean wool and putting it in a bag; you can salvage it! Do not wash it all together because the foreign matter will redistribute itself throughout. Wash each batch separately. There will be a perfect use for each batch appropriately. And in the future, only use quality to start with, if it is your own flock, and examine ways to avoid it next year.

NOTICE TO FINE WOOL BREEDERS: Wools such as Merino, Rambouillet, Targhee, and sheep with over a 64 micron count may be sensitive to this method. They “felt” extremely easy. Test a small batch before going forward with multiple fleeces.

DYEING: Wool is very easy to dye and can take natural dyes, grocery store dyes, and craft dyes. Simply read the instructions for “wool” or “protein fiber” and proceed accordingly. Never use cooking utensils or pots for dyeing unless you are dyeing with edible materials such as food coloring or foods themselves (coffee, tea, wine, etc.).

From The Shepherd Magazine, May 1994, pgs. 44-45.