

HARVESTING GREAT FIBER

Whether you choose to sell the fiber you produce, or to create value-added products right at your farm, the quality and marketability is dependent on several things—the health of the goats, the cleanliness and length of the fiber and your skill in removing it from the animal.

Quality of the fiber will be related to keeping goats healthy and providing adequate minerals for fiber growth. Conventional wisdom says that excessive nutrition for fiber goats—especially excess protein--creates coarser fiber. The scientific community has not verified this grass-roots observation, so there is still some debate about it. Adequate nutrition—enough to meet maintenance and production needs, is mandatory. Excessive nutrition on the other hand is not economically productive and *may* decrease fiber quality. Inadequate nutrition could include not enough feed, not the right feed or heavy parasite load. Inadequate nutrition can result in fiber without luster or strength.

Fiber that contains vegetable matter (VM = hay, weeds or dirt) and fiber that is stained by urine or feces is more difficult to process, less desirable to work with and less marketable. Keeping the goats clean means designing hay feeders that minimize transfer of their feed onto their coats. It means basic cleanliness and no overcrowding.

Harvesting at the right time for the type of goat is important. It allows fiber to reach its maximum length but not to get matted or lost to shedding. Angoras are harvested twice a year and must be shorn. Cashmeres and Pygoras are harvested just once a year—in either late winter or early spring, depending on climate conditions and individual genetics for shedding. There is more flexibility with these cashmere types, for they may be either shorn or combed to harvest the fiber.

There are some plusses and minuses to either method. Shearing removes the entire fleece leaving the goats without protection in cold or damp weather. Imagine yourself taking off a wool coat while staying outside in cold weather. They, like you, would appreciate some protection to avoid discomfort and potential health problems. Protection can be either a warm barn or individual coats.

Shearing can be done with scissors, animal clippers or by hiring someone who specializes in shearing. Be careful of “second cuts.” They are a result of shearing at an angle to the goat’s body instead of flat to the body. It leaves shorter fibers in part and decreases the quality of the fleece.

When cashmere type fibers are sheared, both the downy undercoat and guard hairs come off together. Those coarse guard hairs must be removed. Commercial de-hairing processors will do that. To de-hair by hand is very tedious.

The other methods of removing the cashmere type fiber is to comb the goats or to pluck the clumps of fiber as they are naturally release from the goat's body. Both methods are quite labor-intensive. Combing or plucking should begin approximately in February and continue at weekly intervals until May or until all fiber is harvested. The advantage is that it leaves most of the guard hairs attached to the goat and therefore yields very clean cashmere that does not need de-hairing. It also leaves the goat with some weather protection. It may be a more suitable method for small herds and for those who wish to creating products right at the farm rather than selling the raw fiber.

All fiber will need to be washed. You can find instructions for washing cashmere type fiber at this web address from Hawk's Mountain Ranch's web site <http://www.hmrpygoras.com/WashingFibers.html>. And at <http://www.cagba.org/mohair.shtml>, you will find instructions for washing Angora fiber, courtesy of Colorado Angora Goat Breeders web site.

The next step is carding. It is the process of brushing raw or washed fibers to prepare them as textiles. It opens, cleans, and straightens the fibers in preparation for spinning. Historically people used their fingers to card. Now, hand spinners use tools shaped like flattened dog brushes. The carded fiber is referred to as a roving and is then ready to be spun or used in craft projects. Not everyone chooses to do all the preparation by hand. Often times the fleeces are sent to commercial mills for fiber preparation. Most mills will de-hair, wash and card the fleece.

Spinning the fiber into yarn is best learned from accomplished spinners. However, you can get a feel for the process by taking a little fiber and gently rubbing it between the palms of your hands to make a coarse yarn. Spinning guilds, yarn shops and fiber festivals are wonderful resources for learning the skills to spin yarn, to weave or knit.

ABOUT THE FIBER: Fiber term definition

Luster: The amount of shine in a fiber

Crimp: Crimp describes the kinkiness of an individual fiber and it creates elasticity or how the end product will retain its shape with wear.

Handle or Hand: How it feels, i.e. cool or warm, silky or creamy, smooth or fluffy

Kemp: Coarse animal fiber with a prominent hollow core which won't accept dyes and is brittle—not desirable for spinning.

Matte: Lack of shine or luster

Skirting: Process of removing less desirable areas of the fleece, i.e. stained or kempy areas

Micron: 1/25,400 of an inch, or 0.0000393 inch—very small

Staple: The length of one individual fiber or the length of a ringlet