

Growing Demand for Breed-Specific Yarns and Fibers Helps Small Breeders Preserve Rare or Heritage Breeds in the U.S.

By Kelly Harms

The explosion of the craft and maker movements over the past 20-25 years has opened up new markets for rare or heritage breeds of sheep as spinners, knitters, felters, and weavers discovered the unique wool characteristics and properties these breeds offer. Fiber artists and educators have helped spinners and knitters look beyond the typical Merino wool that's commonly available, and they've started to create a demand for breed-specific wool products.

One of the leading voices of the fiber arts movement is Deborah Robson. She and Carol Ekarius wrote *The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook* in 2011, considered by many as one of the best resources for fiber artists of all types. This exhaustively researched book covers over 200 types of fiber animals (mostly sheep), with detailed histories, fiber characteristics, and suggested preparation for the fiber.

With full-color photos of raw wool and locks, as well as spun yarn and knitted swatches, the book helps all spinners, knitters, and weavers — from beginner to advanced — confidently work with new fibers. The two women also authored *The Field Guide to Fleece*, another go-to resource for fiber artists.

Robson says a major challenge facing rare or heritage sheep breeders is connecting the farm to the fiber users and understanding that market. “The fiber workers who are most interested in rare breeds are likely to be those most committed to their textile activities... The market for rare-breed fibers incorporates aficionados who are not just temporarily involved. We're past the post-9/11 bubble in knitting and moving toward more diverse construction techniques, with weaving having a new uptick thanks in particular to the availability of a variety of solid and affordable rigid heddle looms (which are, for some people, leading to the purchase of floor looms as well),” she notes.

“As a grower, being aware of these bigger trends will be helpful, and knowledge of what's going on can be gained through conversations at fiber festivals and a walk around the commercial areas,” says Robson.

Many of the breeders and fiber artists interviewed for this story stressed the importance of having at least beginner level experience in spinning, knitting, felting, or weaving, or working closely with people who do have the experience. Often providing a spinner with samples of your wool can give you great feedback that can influence your breeding or marketing programs.

Breeders Making A Difference

Amy Ross Phillips Manko of The Ross Farm is fifth-generation farmer in Pennsylvania. She and her family raise 11 different rare or heritage breeds on their National Registry property in Washington County. They also have their own line of natural color yarns and roving they sell at their own retail store and at festivals.

She says “The popularity of fiber arts has grown exponentially in the last decade. More people are seeking out rare breeds and even just real wool. We’ve seen crafters moving away from superwash and chemically treated wool and embracing the natural fibers. It’s wonderful.”

Manko goes on to say “I see a renaissance on the horizon. I think the old-style livestock and the slow food and slow clothing movements are going to create an increased demand for the sheep and their products. People are becoming increasingly more cognizant of where things come from and how they’re produced and impact the environment, the community, the economy. This makes our rare breeds more desirable in the marketplace, creating an interest in them for flavorful meat and beautiful fiber.”

Christiane Payton of North Valley Farm in Yamhill, Oregon, has also experienced the explosion of interest in rare breeds, both for their fiber and for their meat. Like many people who raise rare breeds, Payton came from the fiber side, first as a knitter living in New York City. She later took up spinning, weaving, and felting. After moving to Oregon in 1999, she bought some Romney bred ewes and then discovered Lincolns.

In Lincolns, Payton found a breed that was prolific, thrifty, and just a bit mischievous. It was the perfect fit for their farm and she thought the fiber would support the sheep operation. Payton says she quickly realized that “she couldn’t keep dumping money into the sheep’s mouths while going to Goodwill for sneakers for the kids because the sheep needed their alfalfa. That just wasn’t going to work. So I very quickly became practical and said ‘Alright, what else can we do here?’ And the answer was meat.”

Now about 80 percent of the farm’s revenues comes from direct meat sales of their grass-fed lamb. Payton says that she started to focus on animals that were truly dual-purpose, and knew from her fiber background what a good fleece was but notes she had a lot of learning to do about muscling, growth rates, carcass yields, and marketing. Payton says, “I consider the fiber products the ‘gravy.’ The fiber sales are really important and I still focus on the fleece quality.”

As with all sheep operations, a healthy bottom line is important. “The fiber market has the potential to provide supporting income for shepherds with rare-breed flocks. A fleece at a time, fiber sales can change a waste product to something that contributes significantly to the bottom line. Because shepherds with small flocks (and rare-breed sheep are almost by definition in small flocks) tend to operate close to the wire, this additional income can make a telling difference,” says Robson.

Susie Wilson and her husband Dan operate Su-Dan farms in Canby, Oregon, where they raise Border Leicesters and Gotlands, and sell value-added fiber products through FaceBook and at farmers markets and wool shows, along with wholesale and retail meat sales. Wilson says that the explosion of American wool mills over the past 20-30 years has made a big impact for sheep farmers. She says the interest in local wool products has made it profitable for mills to process fiber for both small and large sheep producers.

“It’s made it possible to get things made of your own wool,” she says. “Now any sheep person, large or small, can get all types of value-added things done to their wool here in the U.S. and in Canada.” Wilson has hundreds of pounds of wool felted each year that she makes into inserts for shoes. She also has yarn made which she then custom dyes for knitters.

Su-Dan Farms make use of every part of the sheep. Besides selling fleeces, roving, and locks, they sell sheep skins or pelts. They salt and dry the skins after slaughter, then send the pelts to a tanner in Vermont to finish processing. While it takes a lot of work to prepare the skins, those sell for between \$200-\$500, depending on the breed and the condition of the pelt. In a business where margins can be razor thin, taking what is essentially a waste by-product of slaughter and creating a significant revenue source is critically important.

Carol and Montana Airey, the mother-daughter team behind Wild Air Farm, have embraced the unique wool colors and patterns of their Shetland sheep to produce one-of-a-kind fleeces favored by handspinners. They have a small farm in Bolton, Massachusetts, where they raise seven brood ewes. The flock was started in 2010 as a 4H project for Montana, but Carol’s background in textiles and fashion made spinning, knitting, and weaving a natural fit for her.

“Being a spinner has allowed us to enhance what we’re doing with the sheep,” says Carol. Montana says one of her favorite activities is to ask Carol which ewe is currently her favorite to spin – which sheep she’d choose if they had to start the flock over again. “I definitely listen to her when she talks about what she likes to spin when I’m trying to pick out my next ram or what type of fleeces I want to breed for,” says Montana.

“I think buying-wise, people really like the colors that come along. There are 13 different colors that Shetland’s have that range from creams to browns to greys to blacks. The ones that sell the best for us are the ones with unique colors or interesting patterns,” says Montana. “Shetlands also have a bunch of different patterns and people are really into the variety of the fleeces. You can’t just get these colors everywhere,” she notes. Carol says they also sell hogget fleeces from their six-month old lambs — a novelty product that isn’t available in many places.

The Airey’s have found that fiber buyers love the stories behind the fleeces. Montana says, “People seem to enjoy the story behind the animals. The woman who bought our first fleece off-the-hoof wanted to know about the sheep, who her parents were, and about

her personality. I had a person who contacted me after buying a fleece at Rhinebeck. They had been doing a fiber blog and using the fleece, pulling it apart and preparing the fleece like it's traditionally done back in Shetland. They contacted me wanting to know about the animal to put it in their blog."

Challenges Facing Rare Breeds

Like many breeders, Letty Klein first started raising sheep because her children wanted a 4H project. They ended up buying a ewe and lamb they later learned was a Karakul, and as Klein says, "That was the start of my love affair with the breed. We have never raised anything else."

"The Karakul is a rare fat-tailed breed in this country, with an origin in south-western Russia. A few were imported into this country around 1912-1924 for the fur trade. Mine is one of the oldest flocks in the country with several old bloodlines. Keeping some of the rarer lines viable has been a challenge, as has finding unrelated breeding stock," says Klein.

Ingrid Painter of Puddleduck Farms in Brownsville, Oregon, has a long-standing love of rare animal breeds. She was a founding member of the American Minor Breeds Conservancy (now the Livestock Conservancy) and first started raising Navajo-Churro sheep in 1974, later adding Jacobs and Shetlands. "I have a lifelong commitment and passion for the Navajo-Churro and sheep in general, and I'm proud to have pioneered the acceptance of showing the less known breeds," says Painter.

"Gradually, over the years, I realized that the Navajo-Churro display many more pattern alleles than any other breed of sheep in the U.S. This has led to the pursuit of identifying all of them and getting them written up. This is not something that I can do alone with only 40 ewes and a limited number of rams. Today I am endeavoring to involve as many breeders of this fascinating breed as possible. Most of us are separated by thousands of miles but the interest is growing rapidly. The ease of Internet is proving to be a great asset in exchanging ideas and defining patterns, though we have a long way to go," Painter says.

Those challenges are just some of ones faced by breeders. As Manko states, "The most difficult lesson is that these rare breeds are rare for a reason. They require more shepherding than commercial breeds and due to the tiny populations of these breeds, you can't always cull for undesirable traits. Many times, you have to 'play the hand you're dealt' and try to correct minor flaws in the next generation by mating your sheep to a sheep with strengths matching her weaknesses."

"We've also absorbed several flocks from folks who got into rare breeds thinking they were going to make a killing financially and that's just not the reality of raising sheep.

Rare breed sheep take longer to mature to market weight as well. While the meat is much more flavorful, you cannot expect the 70 lbs. in 70 days model in most rare breeds. They also require more parasite treatment and hands-on care than commercial sheep. This is a labor of love and something you do for the future, not a ‘get rich quick’ scheme,” says Manko.

Education About Fiber Is Key To Success

Robson states that just the popularity of fiber arts itself isn’t enough for breeders to rely on if they want to be successful. “It has to be followed by increased education about fiber types and how to use them,” she says.

“We’re moving beyond Merino, Cormo, and Bluefaced Leicester here —and those are the breeds most fiber folk are familiar with and accustomed to. *None* of those breeds excels in durability, although they’re all superb in softness. We need to help fiber folk understand that softness, while wonderful, comes at a cost and isn’t appropriate in many applications — for which the rare breeds are better suited,” Robson notes.

She also feels it’s important to know how your breed’s fibers can be effectively used in the fiber arts, and of focusing your marketing on what your breed does well. “Samples go a long way, as do patterns — although you needn’t generate these yourself. You can set up a forum through which people who use your fibers can share their projects with each other. You can locate and point out appropriate Ravelry or other patterns. Does your breed’s wool felt well? Show people! Is it a fantastic rug wool? Consider samples of woven, knitted, braided or other types of rugs,” Robson says.

For example, Karakul wool is well suited for rug making. “The Karakul fleece is a fast growing coarse rug wool that comes in a kaleidoscope of natural colors. I needed something to do with all the wool from twice-a-year shearings. I learned and perfected a way to braid roving and make rugs. I then co-authored a book on the technique, *The Shepherds Rug – a braided rug from roving*,” Klein says.

Manko says there are a lot of benefits in developing a specialty market for your fiber products. “We love working with the mill to create gorgeous small-batch yarns from particular sheep’s fleeces and watching the process of selling that skein from Rose to Janis to become a Mariner sweater that she wears into our booth at the festival the following year. We’re invested in our customers and they’re invested in our flock,” she says.

Fiber Artists Create a Demand for Wool Products

Joellyn Cobb is a long-time fiber artist who started working with wool while her husband was shepherd at the University of Connecticut. “It all started with spinning yarns. I was able to get a hold of just about any breed of wool I wanted. I had two small girls, so during their naps, I taught myself how to spin. The more yarn I spun, the more sweaters, scarves, and hats I knit,” she says.

A friend turned her on to special sewing machines that could sew shearling hides. “That’s when I opened my first very successful business, selling hides, slippers, and my ‘Wooly Bears.’ With this business, I travelled to fairs, show, and sales. I had customers all over... My Bears sold through out the states, Canada, and Japan,” Cobb says.

After a break from wool, Cobb started working with wool fabrics to hook rugs. “I want people to see understand wool fibers can be used in so many ways by anyone. It’s so fascinating. There are people that believe shearing sheep is so wrong, that it’s cruel. I like to show them shearing is just the opposite.”

Cobb also creates needle-felted characters and says “It’s exciting to see what and how the different breeds of wool can be used for specific styles of felting.”

Long-time sheep breeders and sisters, Linda Harwood and Judy Moore, have turned to fiber arts into businesses that take them to sheep and fiber shows across the Midwest and East Coast. When she had to sell her sheep for health reasons, Harwood turned her love of the antique art of hooking rugs into a full-time business. “I now teach rug hooking, do commission work, and dye wool for other hookers, and I also do fiber shows with the help of my sister,” says Harwood.

Moore raises Cheviots and Hampshires, but has also judged rare breeds across the country. She began her fiber journey when she was a teacher. “While I was teaching I would make for all my students a little felted lamb for one of their Christmas presents. To this day I still have some of my past students talk about the little lamb or they still have it,” Moore marvels.

“I use my Cheviot wool for felting and with the help of my sister I get wool fabric for the Penny/Wool Appliqué rugs. After I retired from teaching, I started to go with my sister to help her in her booth at the sheep and wool fiber shows. It was at that time I started offering some of my items for sale.”

Shave ‘Em to Save ‘Em and the Future of Rare Breeds

In 2019, the Livestock Conservancy is launching the Shave ‘Em to Save ‘Em Challenge. The program’s goal is to make it more profitable to raise heritage sheep breeds by encouraging fiber artists to try rare wools for their projects. The program will also help educate breeders about preparing wool for sale and how to market and reach new customers and fiber artists.

The program works like this: Fiber artists will buy wool from rare breed fiber providers and get a “stamp” in their “passport.” Artists can find the wool through the Conservancy’s online breeder and products directory. They can they earn prizes for completing projects, and can share their projects on FaceBook and Ravelry. Visit the Livestock Conservancy at www.livestockconservancy.org or RareWool.org for more details.

Robson says “I’m heartened by the interest in rare fiber breeds that has been developing over the past two decades. I think their future depends upon cultivating breed-specific supplies and education. In my teaching, and admittedly the people who come to the workshops and retreats that I facilitate may be self-selecting for these interests, I find that fiber folk are fascinated by the details of how breeds develop, how wools are different from each other, why the diversity of the gene pool matters — and by the fact that each of them can make a difference just by buying and enjoying breed-specific wools. The more we get shepherds and fiber folk communicating, the better it will be for the rare fiber breeds.

For more information about the breeders and fiber artists featured in this article, please visit their websites.

Deborah Robson — <https://www.drobson.info/index.html>

Amy Ross Phillip Manko, The Ross Farm — <https://www.therosfarm.com/>

Christiane Payton, North Valley Farm — <http://www.northvalleyfarm.com/>

Susie Wilson, Su-Dan Farms — <http://www.sudanfarm.com/>

Carol and Montana Airey, Wild Air Farm — <https://wildairfarms.com/>

Letty Klein, Pine Lane Farm — <https://www.plfkarakuls.com/>

Ingrid Painter, Puddleduck Farm — <https://www.puddleduckfarm.net/>

Joellyn Cobb, Hooked on Wool Primitives — <http://hookedonwoolprimitives.blogspot.com/>

Linda Harwood — <http://www.harwoodhookedonewe.com/Welcome.html>

Judy Moore — http://www.harwoodhookedonewe.com/JM_Creations.html

BOXED MATERIAL: What do Black Welsh Mountain, Clun Forests, Cotswold, Dorset Horn, Jacob, Karakul, Leicester Longwool, Lincoln, Navajo-Churro, Romeldale/CVM, and Saint Croix sheep have in common? They are all listed as Threatened by the

Livestock Conservancy, meaning there are fewer than 1,000 annual registrations in North America and there is an estimated global population of less than 5,000 animals.