

The Importance of Skirting Fleeces Well

One breeder's opinion...

By Karen Lobb

Over the years since we first started raising Jacob and Navajo-Churro sheep we've sold and shown a fair amount of wool. The thing we've found to be most helpful in selling them (and placing well at shows) is to 'skirt' them well. Skirting is the process of removing debris, vegetation, dung tags, short fibers, second cuts, etc. from a freshly shorn fleece. Ideally the fleece should be thrown on a skirting table immediately after being shorn so contaminants can be removed prior to show, sale or storage.

To skirt a raw/grease fleece:

Lay the fleece out on a skirting table with a mesh or slotted top. If you don't have a skirting table you can find plans for a folding table at www.bideaweefarm.com/forms.htm. Shake the fleece well to remove any easily dislodged hay and/or second cuts. Ideally a breed quality fleece should be consistent from neck to tail. A good judge will mark it down if the fleece has much variation in texture or staple length. Second cuts are also the kiss of death both for the show and for sale to handspinners.

Go around the edges (outer 1 to 3 inches) and pull off any dung or lanolin tags, matted wool, and locks which are substantially shorter or different in texture than the rest of the fleece. If the neck has too much hay in it pull that entire section out. Hopefully your shearer discarded the belly wool but if not pull that out too. I skirt the britch area (back legs) heavily too since that's often coarser than the rest of the fleece. It's a judgment call on how much to take out - a lot of the fleece weight is in the britch and removing it will make the fleece lighter but if may be worth if it's substantially coarser than the rest of the fleece.

Be sure to strength test random locks to be sure the wool is strong (no breaks or tenderness) and healthy. To do that pull a roughly 1/2 inch thick lock and grab the top with one hand and the bottom with the other then give it a good tug - equivalent to a 7 to 9 lb. pull on a fish scale. Note: for Navajo-Churro or other double coated wools, grab the bottom/cut end well enough to keep the inner and outer coats from separating as you pull.

If you're entering the fleece in a show, go back over it one more time pretending you're a judge to see what you may have missed. In my experience, a clean, healthy fleece will place well and almost always sells. And, since there's usually a chance the judge isn't familiar with either Jacob or Navajo-Churro wool; send a copy of the breed standard along with your entry form.