



by Barbara Parry

For more than a decade the imperative to “go local” has redefined the way many households market and eat, buying what’s in season and supporting local farms in the process. As the locavore ethos increasingly reshapes the way we shop, growing numbers of knitters are beginning to view the yarn on their needles in a similar light. Is it possible to trace fiber from yarn to barn, and if so, just how far away is the barn in question?

If you’re longing to get your hands on the sheep (or goat, or bunny, or alpaca) that supplied your skein, take heart. Fiber foraging close to home takes sleuthing, but you may be surprised by the variety of homegrown yarns available within a 50-mile radius (give or take) from your door. This series (the first of three) will show you just how easy it is to sample the local knitting flavor.

The Lure of Local Wool

Wool is a versatile, durable, renewable, ecologically-sound resource—just ask any sheep. And the things that keep sheep healthy—open land, grass and fresh water—are good for us, too. Yet since the mid-20th century (thanks in part to the rise of synthetic fibers), the American wool industry has been in decline—along with the mills that once processed the fiber. The number of sheep being raised in the U.S. is just 10% of what it was in the 1940s. Fifty percent of the world’s wool now comes from China, Australia and New Zealand and the bulk of domestically raised wool is exported to Asia for processing (where it’s made into textiles and garments that are then imported back into the U.S.).

There is, however, a counterculture in the making. The past ten years have seen a rise in both small sheep farms that are fastidiously producing hard-to-find wools of the highest possible standards and independent ranches marketing their own yarn. Once perceived as scratchy, slub-ridden and unrefined, farm yarns have vastly improved in quality, variety and availability. There are also more options for fiber processing closer to home. A decade ago, most fiber mills had minimum lot runs of 65 pounds or more. Unless a farm was willing to have their wool combined with wool from several farms, there weren’t many options for shepherds of small flocks to produce their own line of yarn. But since 2000, a growing number of fiber micro-mills are putting local yarn production within the reach of small farmers. The ever-expanding reach of the Internet has also been a boon to independent fiber producers, giving them access to wider audiences and allowing them to sell

and market directly to knitters.



Columbia ewe and lamb at Imperial Stock Ranch. Photo courtesy Jeanne Carver.

Interest for local yarns does more than expand knitting stashes—it also helps preserve specific sheep while helping to maintain working farms and ranches. Smaller wool operations tend to specialize in specific breeds, investing decades in improving their stock. (Icelandics, Leicester Longwools, Shetlands, Jacobs, California Variegated Mutants and Navajo Churros are just a few of the minor breeds found in the U.S.) Farms dedicated to preserving these animals face the challenge of working with a more limited gene pool. Buying yarn from shepherds working with these rare or recovering breeds sustains the ongoing efforts to preserve the animals with the added bonus of working with some truly unique yarn.

At Foxhill Farm in Lee, Massachusetts, Alice Field specializes in Cormo sheep, a breed noted for its resilient, fine wool. In business for more than ten years, she's passionate about raising what she calls "the perfect fleece." "It's not just about having sheep or being a knitter; it's understanding all of it," she explains. "It's knowing what makes one animal better than another. When every generation is better than the one before, you know you are doing it right." Alice's commitment to raising quality sheep makes her a highly sought out breeder for farms looking to

establish their own Cormo flocks.



Icelandic skeins from Lavender Fleece. Photo by Barbara Parry

At Lavender Fleece in Midland, Michigan, Laurie Ball-Gisch raises Icelandic sheep, an ancient breed she fell in love with more than 12 years ago. She now keeps 12 rams for a flock of 45-50 ewes. That's a high ram-to-ewe ratio but one that helps her maintain genetic diversity within her flock. This is important, as shepherds often come to her farm looking for starter flocks.

In Wasco County, Oregon, Imperial Stock Ranch's herd of Columbia sheep dates back to 1871, the date of the original homestead deed. Owners Jeane and Dan Carver launched their yarn company, Imperial Yarn, in 2008, in part to help preserve the working heritage of their ranch. "It was either figure out a way to make the sheep work, or the sheep would be gone from the land," explains Jeanne.

While preserving breedlines is a worthy effort, there's a more selfish, knitterly reason to find your fleece at local farms—the yarn spun from it is usually great stuff. That's because small-flock farmers tend to take extra measures to ensure the quality of their fleece. In the central and eastern U.S. where winters force sheep to be fed hay in close quarters during winter months, some shepherds go as far as outfitting their sheep in special jackets that protect the fleece from chaff and seed

contamination. This method, though inconvenient, is the best way for small farms—that tend to avoid carbonization, a harsh process that destroys the vegetable matter in wool, but does a number on the fiber—to raise clean wool.

Alice Field of Foxhill Farm in Lee, Massachusetts keeps her Cormo flock covered 365 days a year. “Sheep covers are a nightmare. Added work, added expense,” she says. “But you do end up with superior product.” At Whitefish Bay Farm in Door County, Wisconsin, Gretchen and Richard Regnery coat their flock of 127 Corriedale sheep, a practice that ensures both a lovely yarn and fleeces highly coveted by handspinners (they sell out every year).

Greener Pastures

Good farmers not only care deeply for their flocks, they are also good stewards of their land. Get to know a local fiber farmer and you might be surprised to discover the challenges of raising sheep in your neck of the woods.



Flock on the high desert at Imperial Stock Ranch. Photo courtesy Jeanne Carver.

At Imperial Stock Ranch, which spans 50 square miles of high desert plateau, Jeanne and Dan Carver are constantly juggling a balance between the welfare of the herd and its impact on the land “In a brittle environment, that receives 5-8 inches of rainfall annually, we have to be good observers,” says Jeanne. “When it comes to managing the land, we have learned to tread lightly”.

If your curiosity about the backside of fiber production is piqued, research a farm or ranch in your area and check things out for yourself. (Farmers' days are busy, so call in advance to be sure someone is available to meet you.) Even if you know nothing about land management or animal husbandry, some things are easily observable. How are the livestock treated? Do they look healthy? How and what are the sheep fed? Do they have adequate shelter and access to fresh water? What is the condition of the pastures? Is the land given adequate recovery time between grazing rotations? Are practices being used to protect the watershed? How are weeds being controlled? How does the farm tackle manure management? Most sheep farmers will be happy to answer your questions and you'll get a better appreciation not only of what goes into growing good fleece, but why fiber from smaller scale farms tends to be pricier than its mass market counterparts.

Knitting locally anchors you to your specific place in a specific time and is an investment in where you live. Buying yarn from a farm nearby is not likely to shake up the American sheep industry, but it will be significant for the nearby farm. Knowing exactly where your yarn came from is nourishing and intensely satisfying. Look up from your knitting and think about a flock, not too far away that is watching the same clouds, experiencing the same weather—perhaps scanning the same horizon you see from wherever you knit—while growing next year's crop of yarn. Embrace it as a healthy supplement to a balanced yarn diet.



Tips for Local Fiber Foraging

- Sheep and wool festivals and agricultural fairs are the best one-stop shop for the best of what your region has to offer. If you can't attend a festival, check out the vendor listing to discover farms close to you. Fiber farmers also often turn up at farmers markets, especially if the farm also raises produce or meat.
- Hunt and gather online. Search engine key words such as “fiber farm,” “local wool” and “yarn farm” yield pages of leads. Keep in mind that many small flocks have low online profiles and low-tech shopping options. Closing the deal may entail an e-mail or good, old-fashioned phone call.
- Most regions have organizations and websites that promote local farm products. Although skewed toward local food, these websites that promote local farm products (try Foodroutes.org or localharvest.org) often point to sheep farms offering fiber and yarn. The Rodale Institute (http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/farm_locator) also offers a handy farm locator).
- Look up your state's sheep breeders' association. Nearly every state has one and listings often indicate the farm's product (fleeces, roving, yarn, meat, sheep skins).

- Ask your local yarn store. Some feature yarns from area farms and/or independent fiber producers. My LYS, Metaphor Yarns of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts carries at least five lines of yarns from farms less than 50 miles from the shop.