

EVALUATING WOOL

Wool is evaluated based on grade (fiber diameter), staple length and strength, greasy fleece weight, and clean yield. Other factors to consider are color, purity, and handle. There are some differences in evaluating wool when the wool is commercially processed versus used for hand spinning.

Wool testing laboratories can be used to objectively evaluate wool.



The first thing to look at in a sheep's fleece is grade or fiber diameter. Fine fibers have smaller diameters than coarse fibers and are usually worth more (in the commercial market). The amount of crimp (waviness) that wool has can be an indicator of fineness. Locks with more crimp per inch are finer. Fine wool is also softer. While some difference is expected, uniformity of grade is also important. Wool from the breech (hind leg) is usually the coarsest.



Staple length is another important criteria for evaluating wool. Longer is better. Every grade has a length requirement. Staple length can be assessed by measuring your middle finger and using it as a guide to measure locks. Length is measured from the base to the tip of the fiber. Uniformity of length is just as important as staple length.

Staple length can be affected by breaks or tenderness in the wool fibers. You can test for this by pulling the lock from each end. Weakness or breaks result from stresses experienced by the sheep such as sickness, lambing difficulties, or weather events.



Wool is sold based on weight, so heavier fleeces are obviously more desirable. Clean yield is also important. It is the percentage of useable fiber in a fleece after scouring. Scouring removes dirt and other non-wool material from the wool. It's a key factor in determining the value of wool and is expressed as a percentage of the original greasy fleece weight. Finer fleeces are usually lower yielding than coarser fleeces, due in part to their higher lanolin (oil) content.



Various contaminants can reduce the value of wool. The most common is vegetable matter. Vegetable matter (VM) refers to natural plant material like hay, straw, grass, seeds, and burrs that get tangled in the sheep's fleece. Second cuts are caused by the shearer cutting the wool fibers two or more times. Dark fibers are undesirable in white fleeces. Other potential contaminants include medullated fibers (kemp), dirt, urine stains and dung (tags), baling twine, plastics, and branding fluids. Some contaminants can be removed via skirting, others during scouring. Some can't be removed.

