

Spinning Soft Yarn with a Handspindle

Simple steps and slow spinning make soft, squishy skeins

by Mary Spanos

Spinning soft yarn with a handspindle involves the same basic idea as spinning soft yarn with a spinning wheel (see *Spinning Soft Yarn*, *Spin-Off*, Summer 2003, 44-47); put less twist in the singles and if you ply the singles, make a balanced plied yarn. This article will focus on a few techniques for making your handspun yarn softer, when you want it to be.

As easy as that sounds, adding a new technique to your skill set will take some practice, especially if your typical handspun yarn is dense and firm because your spindle spinning time is as much about stress relief as it is about yarn production. So take a few deep breaths, find your lightest weight spindle, and practice slowing down.

Choosing the right spindle

For spinning soft, low twist yarns, spindle weight is very important. Low twist singles can't hold up as much weight as high twist singles. You also have to consider the fact that a spindle's weight increases as you spin and wind on more yarn. So to spin a low-twist yarn, you will probably need to use a lighter weight spindle than you have in the past.

My favorite spindle weight for spinning soft singles for sock yarn is a half-ounce spindle. I usually knit socks with a two-ply yarn on U.S. size 0 needles so the singles are fairly fine. For thicker soft yarns I often use a one-ounce spindle. I rarely use heavier spindles but I live in a warm climate, where the snows always melts the next day, and I like to knit and weave with fine yarns. If you need thick sweaters and thick blankets then you may need heavier spindles.

Low twist spindle spinning doesn't need the high-speed spin that some whorls are designed for. A flat wide whorl usually produces a longer and slower *spin time* and often works best for this type of spinning.

We are very fortunate these days to have so many spindle makers producing good quality tools. There are a tremendous variety of spindles available now. If your preferences run to the unusual, like very lightweight spindles or low-whorl spindles, you can find a spindle maker that is willing to do custom work. In the case of the spindle I used while writing this article, I found high-whorl spindles that I liked on a web site and wrote to the maker, Mike Fine of Fine Wood Arts. He was happy to make a



Any type of yarn can be spun with a handspindle. Spinning soft, lofty yarns is easy with a lightweight spindle and a slow twist.

low-whorl version of my favorite style. Never hesitate asking for custom features; having the right tool for the job is important to the success of your work.

Choosing the right fiber

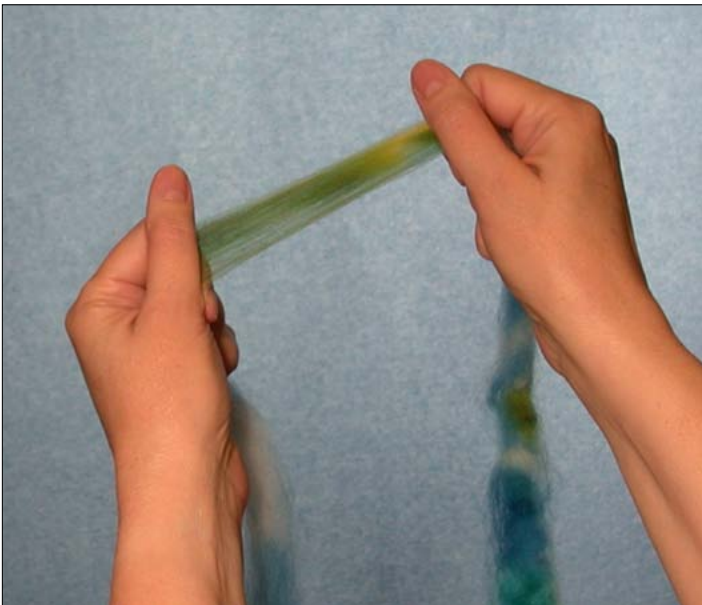
I've used these techniques for wools and silks that have a four-inch or longer staple length. All wools, from the crimping Merino to the long curls of Wensleydale, make lovely low twist yarn. The superwash wools used in this article have a four-inch staple length and were dyed by Mercedes Tarasovich-Clark.

This article was published in Spin Off magazine in 2003 (volume 27, number 4, pages 44 to 47). It is a short introduction followed by a series of photographs with descriptions. The version offered here is the text and photographs that were created by the author and sent to Spin Off and are protected by her copyright. This does not include any edits or additional photographs that may have been included in the Spin Off publication and that would be the property of Interweave Press. Links have been updated. You are welcome to download and print this article for your personal use.



Tearing roving into strips

Preparing the fibers for spinning is more important for spindle spinning than for wheel spinning because your hands are busy managing the spindle and have less free time to deal with problems.



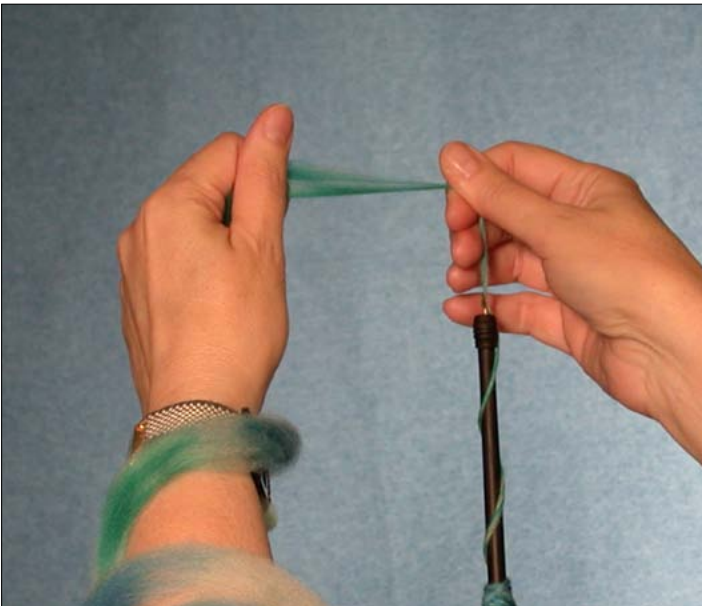
Predrafting

Regardless of what type of fiber preparation you start with, commercial roving or handcarded batts, pre-draft the fibers by tugging them gently between your hands to loosen the fibers and to check for any debris, nips, or short fibers that need to be removed. As I pre-draft I try to make the final *roving* contain about two or three times the amount of fiber that will end up in the yarn.



Vertical Drafting Triangle...

Maintaining the drafting triangle is a good idea for most spinning but it seems to be particularly important for spinning a low-twist yarn on a spindle. It ensures that the fibers are neat and straight when they enter the yarn and that helps keep the yarn strong even when there isn't much twist. When I spin sitting down (which is how I usually spin) or when the fiber staple length is shorter, I typically hold my fiber hand up so the drafting triangle and the new yarn form a straight line down to the spindle hook.



...or Horizontal Drafting Triangle

When I spin standing up and have a longer staple fiber, I often hold the drafting triangle horizontally between my hands and the new yarn hangs over the fingers of my spindle hand. This allows me to comfortably look down at the triangle and watch it as I spin. When I spin, I give the spindle a gentle spin with my spindle hand and then reach back up to pinch the point of the drafting triangle and pull out the amount of fiber that I want in the new yarn. I release my pinch and let the twist move into the fibers, reaching back up to pinch again at the new point of the drafting triangle. It is a pinch and pull motion. The gentle, moderate speed of the whorl needs to match the speed that your hand can move so that the right amount of twist gets into the fibers to make the strong enough to hold the spindle up. The speed should be slow enough so the twist doesn't travel too far into the drafting triangle. If the twist consumes the drafting triangle, then the spindle is spinning too fast. An occasional over-enthusiastic spin can be tempered by letting the speedy spindle whorl brush against your pant leg or a chair, anything that is handy that can act as a brake.



Relaxing yarn to check twist

To maintain consistency for a project, when I stop spinning and prepare to wind the yarn onto the spindle, I pay attention to how far the yarn can relax before forming kinks. When I spin my *standard* soft yarn, the new single can hang just a little between my outstretched hands before it twists and forms a soft kink. I look for that same amount of hanging every time I wind on the yarn. As you spin, if there is a little too much twist in the yarn you can wait while the spindle comes to a stop and reverses and let it take some twist out. Letting the spindle untwist a little can even become part of your normal spinning rhythm.



Winding ball from spindle

When the spindle is full or too heavy to continue, if I am spinning to make a singles yarn, then I'm finished. If I need to make a plied yarn, then I wind the singles off the spindle on to a ball (either styrofoam or felt), set it aside for plying later, and spin another spindle full of singles.



Winding the plying ball

Consistent, balanced plying is very important when making a plied soft yarn. To improve my results and make the process more pleasant, I break up the plying operation into two steps. In step one I wind the singles together and then in step two I add the twist. With a ball of singles held safely in a bowl and with the spindle full of singles held securely (in this case I found a basket with handles that was the right size to hold my spindle), I wind the singles together onto another ball. This gives me time to pay attention so I can make sure that the two singles are even and neither one has any kinks.



Plying from ball and Checking plying twist

Plying from a ball is my favorite way to ply. I don't have to juggle several tasks at once, as in our typical plying technique. When you ply from a ball, you unwind a length of singles from the ball (where they are already nice and neat and kink-free) and spin twist in the new yarn. There is nothing to distract you from doing a good job of simply putting the right amount of twist into the plied yarn. Using this technique you can easily make three-ply or four-ply yarn with a spindle. Also, it is very easy to stop in the middle of plying and set everything down without creating a tangled mess. This is an ancient technique that has been used for centuries by spindle spinners.

When it is time to wind on the newly plied yarn, I let it relax between my hands and make sure that it doesn't twist back on itself, so I know it is a balanced ply. If it has too much twist, then I unwind more singles from the ball. If it has too little twist, then I spin the spindle again.



Practice slowing down

Choosing a project specifically to learn a new technique can be very helpful. A knitting project that uses singles yarn—socks, mittens, or a scarf—is perfect for learning to slow your spindle down to make soft, low-twist yarns.

Start by choosing a project and knitting needles. Take your best guess at what the yarn should be like and spin just a few yards of singles. Wind the yarn off the spindle into a skein, which will probably only have a few of loops. Hold the skein stretched between your hands and pass the yarn through the steam from a boiling teakettle. This will set the twist in the yarn so it won't untwist while you knit.

Lay the skein in your lap and start knitting. It won't take long for you to decide whether the yarn is *right*. Spin a couple more yards of an improved yarn, steam it, and knit with it. It can be surprising to see how quickly you can change and improve your spinning when the time between spinning, using the yarn, and spinning again is reduced to a few minutes. Don't worry about ripping out the less than perfect yarns. This is a practice project, it isn't suppose to be perfect.

Protect your spindle investment

A long, thin piece of wood (like a spindle shaft) with a weight on one end (like a spindle whorl) can be bent very easily given time and proper conditions. If you store your spindles in an attractive arrangement like flowers in a vase, then you are slowly bending the shafts so the spindles will eventually wobble annoyingly when you spin.

Spindles are safer when stored hanging. Pliers and wire from the hardware store make simple and useful spindle hangers that can be hung from any rod in your home. A decorative curtain rod can be hung on a studio wall to hold loops of yarn—instead of a curtain—for hanging spindles. Cup holders or screw eyes can be screwed in to the outer edges of shelves also create an attractive display and safe harbor for spindles.

Find a way to store your spindles so the shaft is protected, not only from breaking, but also from bending.

