

# Animal Fiber: More Than Just Sheep

Wool is the most commonly used animal fiber. The fiber comes from the soft, hairy covering of sheep. There are many different breeds of sheep and the wool from each has different qualities and characteristics. The finer the wool, the softer it is, while coarser grades are more durable and less likely to pill. Sheep's wool comes in various colors including shades of white, black, gray, silver, brown, and red. Most modern domesticated sheep grow white wool. This is because white wool can be dyed any color - sometimes using natural plants like indigo, madder and goldenrod to add color. Although sheep's wool is the most commonly used animal fiber it is certainly not the only one.

**Alpaca fiber** is warmer than sheep's wool and lighter in weight. It is soft, fine, glossy, and luxurious. Most alpaca fiber is white, but it also comes in various shades of brown and black.

**Angora wool** or Angora fiber refers to the down coat of Angora rabbits. Angora is prized for its softness, thin fibers and fluffiness. Angora fiber comes in white, black, and various shades of brown.

**Bison fiber** is made up of course guard hairs and fine downy hairs. If the downy hairs are separated from the guard hairs a finer, softer yarn can be produced.

**Cashmere wool** is wool obtained from the Cashmere goat. Cashmere is fine in texture, strong, light, and soft. The most desired color of cashmere is white because it can be easily dyed however, naturally the fiber comes in many other shades from cream to brown to black.

**Qiviut** is the fine underwool of the muskox. Qiviut fibers are long, fine and relatively smooth. It is approximately eight times warmer than sheep's wool and does not felt or shrink.

With any animal fiber, the individual fibers look different, while all synthetic fibers look the same. This is an easy way to tell the difference between natural and man-made fibers.



Ed Godfrey runs a pin drafter with blends of mohair and merino wool at the Battenkill Fibers in Greenwich. Photo by Derek Pruitt courtesy of *The Post-Star*, Glens Falls, NY.

**Newspaper Activity:** Look through the newspaper (print or electronic) and other sources for stories, pictures or ads about fabrics/textiles. Did you find any examples of products that could be made or are made with wool?