

Here on our chilly knoll February morning temperatures were zero (Fahrenheit) or lower on twenty-one of the month's twenty-eight days. Since we are outside or in the barn doing our livestock chores, carrying in wood, moving snow, and much more every day, my thoughts quite naturally go to socks.

Warm feet are a priority during the winter, and they are not always easily attained. Boots that are suitable for barn use are not necessarily warm. It is imperative to have something inside those rubber barn boots that keeps the toes from freezing.

Felt insoles are nice, but the main job is done by socks. Without warm socks, this February would have been much less enjoyable and, in fact, downright miserable.

When I look at my socks, I first see something quite unlike the patterned stockings I wear during the winter. Instead, I see a flock of sheep, their wool ready for shearing. I notice the Cotswold ewe whose strong, shiny wool will make long-wearing heels on my socks. I see the black Icelandic Åsa whose wool will contrast nicely with white Icelandic Freya's fleece for a pair of warm socks. And I see all of the other ewes whose wool might keep my feet warm during the winter.

Then, in my mind's eye, I watch us shearing those ewes and hear the soft "snick, snick" of the hand blades as they slip along the bodies of the sheep, leaving them a little wool for protection against chilly spring weather and summer insects.

I see the wool processing I will do, too, all of the steps that go into making raw sheep fleece into yarn for socks and other warm clothing. After I sort out the wool that is contaminated with vegetable matter and sheep manure, I wash the good fleece in hot water and soap. After it is thoroughly clean and rinsed, I stuff the heavy, sodden mass into an old pillowcase, take it outside, and swing it wildly in arcs. Centrifugal force removes much of the water from the wool. I lay the fleece out on racks and leave it until it is thoroughly dry.

Then comes "carding," the process by which the wool is fluffed and straightened out with the use of tools that look somewhat like dog combs. In recent years, I have mostly used my electrically powered

drum carder. It is faster and does a better job than I do with the hand cards.

I spin the carded wool on my Ashford spinning wheel, making yarn that I can knit into socks or other garments. Often, I use the wool in its natural colors, admiring the shades of white, gray, and black in the patterns I work into the socks.

Sometimes, though, it is interesting to see what colors I can make by dyeing the wool or yarn--or socks--at any stage. I use environmentally friendly powdered dyes, but I also enjoy coloring yarn with the plant matter that I can find here on the farm.

Right now, I have a pair of socks in progress. They will have a pattern of stripes, dots, and zig-zags that I will decide on as I knit. I started with a peachy beige I obtained by first dyeing some wool with a plant from the garden called "strawberry spinach." I didn't get much color, so I "overdyed" the yarn with red onion skins. I like this color, but doubt if I will ever get the same shade again.

As I progress with the knitting, I will change colors frequently. I have two shades of brown from the hulls of black walnuts. The darker brown was from the first dye bath, and another lighter shade was easy to get from the diluted color left in the bath. I have natural white yarn, too, and some strong yellow that resulted from last fall's goldenrod flowers. I think these socks will be pretty when I am finished, but attractive or not, hidden in my dark blue barn boots, they will keep my feet warm on cold days. I have the sheep flock to thank.