

# Rustic Suri and the Search for Imperfection

By

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Rustic suri is all about perfection. It competes with cashmere for fineness. Judith Korff calls it “the silk without the worm”. The suri in the show ring is all about the best luster, the best lock structure, the best handle, the most dense and the most uniform.

Processed suri is a further attempt at perfection. It can be dehaired, not once but twice to remove primary fibers. Some mills provide assurance that somewhere between 30 and 50 percent of the incoming fiber will be eliminated from the finished product because it didn’t meet the mill’s standards for perfection.

If this is the direction that the suri fiber industry is moving, why would anyone be interested in developing a less than perfect fiber product? Because we can, that’s why.

Handspun fiber of any type was not developed to be perfect although there are hand spinners who would disagree with this statement. But it is also true that if perfect yarn is the product desired, it is available from the mill in almost any weight.

## Going Rustic

Rustic yarn is all about creativity and imperfection. It’s about taking the fiber that you have and creating something that goes beyond the limits of what everyone else is doing. In the beginning, the knowledge and the skills may be less than expected, but improvement comes based on some aspect of natural talent, good luck, and the willingness to learn from the things that didn’t work. It also helps if you have someone nearby who initially knows more than you do.

## Materials

A scale that measures in grams and ounces

A calculator. For ease I use 30 grams as equivalent to one ounce

Hand cards or dog brushes

Drop spindle

A mechanical carder and a spinning wheel are nice to have but not necessary

## **Sorting**

Start with a bag of neck and leg fiber. No one else wanted it anyway and it can produce good material to work with. The fiber grade was primarily a three with some two and grade four included. Since I wanted to make items that would wear well, and the neck and leg fiber invited experimentation, that was the logical choice.

Separate the good stuff from the extremely straight fibers, hay particles, second cuts and anything that might have traveled through the GI system.

## **Washing**

Weigh the sorted fiber and divide it into batches of 8 to 16 oz. each. Fill a sink or dishpan with hot water. Add about 1/3 cup of liquid Tide. Traditionally Dawn has been the recommended product, but it takes more rinsing to get rid of the suds when you use Dawn. Add the fiber. Submerge it and soak for 30 – 45 minutes. That means leave it alone. Poke it with a wooden spoon if you have to, but the more you handle it the more the fibers cling together.

Drain the fiber. I use a colander. Refill the tub and add more detergent. Soak the fiber a second time. White fiber that you intend to use sometimes needs a third wash. If you plan to dye the fiber you don't need to be obsessive about a little dirt or cloudy rinse water.

Rinse as many times as needed to get the suds out. My first rinse can look like a third wash cycle. I sometimes use a fabric softener in my final soak. I don't think it makes a big difference in the feel of the final product but it smells good.

Allow the fiber to dry. Begin pulling sections of locks apart to decrease the drying time.

## **Dyeing**

Weigh the fiber again. I have used Susan Rex's book "Complex Color" and Pro dyes to determine color and depth of shade. For a saturated shade you use 1 cc of liquid dye for every gram of dry fiber. Most dye books have a formula for converting dry dye to liquid dye. Lighter shades obviously require less liquid dye.

Understand that, in the beginning, dyeing is about the exploration of faith. You may know what you want and have a basic understanding of the process but it takes some experience to develop expertise. I keep cards with a sample of the dyed

fiber with the formula used. If I am dyeing over a colored fiber, I note that on the card

I have a set of cooking ware that I dye with. Acid dyes require both heat and acid. Some dye manufacturers include the acid in the dye. Since I use white vinegar, I try to estimate the amount of water/vinegar needed to cover the fiber that I am dyeing. The ratio is three parts (water) to one part (vinegar). Bring the mixture to a boil and lower the heat. Add the dye. Then add the fiber. This is where creativity comes into play. When all the fiber is added at one time, you get consistency of color. When you allow part of the fiber to remain dry and submerge it later, you obtain variations in the shade of color.

Sometimes I dye washed locks, and sometimes it is finished skeins. Sometimes I think I need more dye. Sometimes the finished color couldn't be described accurately or repeated. When you find yourself in this position, you call yourself a true fiber artist.

## **Carding**

Carding equipment varies in price. Least expensive is a set of dog brushes from a pet store or Walmart. There are also hand cards available. For some reason, I have acquired a skill for producing the best rustic suri using one hand card and one dog brush. This gives me more control over the finished product.

## **Spinning**

The most rustic fiber is produced by spinning from a handful of locks that have been finger picked to separate the fibers. Less rustic is prepared from hand cards or a mechanical carder that encourages the parallel placement of fibers and still allows some random placement as well. The variation is what I call "character". When you decide on the proportion of each, you want to try and maintain the consistency.

Most new spinners begin with a drop spindle. The best spindle for a spinner with no or little experience weighs between 1 and 1.5 ounces.

Several years ago I met an anthropologist who worked for the Mayo Clinic and imported camel yarn spun by nomads in Mongolia. Each skein was spun by a different native spinner and each one was unique. You will develop your own style.

Access to a spinning wheel certainly makes the production of finished yarn faster. Inexperience with a spinning wheel almost guarantees that you will automatically produce a rustic product.

When I am developing yarn with warmth and insulating qualities in mind, my goal is to make one yard equal to one gram in weight. This is heavier than standard

worsted since four ounces of wool (120 grams in round numbers) yields approximately 200 yards. Four ounces of a typical wool sport yarn produces approximately 350 yards. While the suri “worsted” yarn appears equivalent in size to the wool worsted, it is heavier in weight and therefore provides the additional insulation and warmth.

## **Product Development**

I’m a knitter so most of my efforts in developing an end product have involved knitting. Since I always seem to be interested in trying something new, I think of the process as “tinkering with suri”.

For the sake of economy I process, dye, and spin small amounts of fiber. The ideal use of these small samples is knitting baby items. They are attractive in natural colors, dyed in pastel shades or vivid colors. They sell well since people are often looking for baby shower gifts. I donate them to charity auctions. Sometimes they become collector items.

If I want to explore a special technique, I’ll make a scarf or a simple headband. Living in a state known for cold winter temperatures and outdoor sports makes suri alpaca items a desirable sales item.

I’m always looking for patterns that could be replicated and improved using suri. Slouchy sweaters are in fashion right now. I can’t think of a fiber that slouches better than suri.

I found a pattern for felted baby boots in the knitting book “Essential Baby” by Debbie Bliss. I used my home grown rustic suri in a weight that I considered equivalent to the instructions in the book. When completed, the boots went into the washing machine with a clean pair of jeans and hot water. At the end of the wash cycle, I pulled them out and they were larger than when I first started. Back they went into the washing machine with hotter water. While there was no change at the end of the second wash, I observed that the wispy suri locks floating along the surface were very attractive. I named the result “enmeshed fiber”. As the psychological term suggests, the fiber was not independent in the way that it was acting, but it certainly couldn’t be called “felted”. Then I made a second pair to see if I could replicate the process. It worked. However, if making suri alpaca felted baby boots that looked anything like the photo in the book, I had failed.

I keep a running list of what I would like to try. At the present time I am planning on making a pair of hooked rug pads in suri for chairs with well worn seats. Also on my wish list is a saddle pad of suri and wool. Since woolen felted saddle pads sell in the \$300 range and horse people purchase them for their comfort factor, why not add alpaca since this fiber is well known for wicking away moisture? And, if the combination suri alpaca and wool saddle pad actually felts with moisture and agitation from the movement of the horse, wouldn’t that be awesome!

## **In conclusion**

Rustic suri alpaca yarn will never compete with the extraordinary fine suri yarn that is destined to be at the top of the fiber chain. Rustic suri is, however, a product that many suri owners may want to invest time, energy and creativity.

The project actually went beyond my expectations. I found myself continually thinking about extending the uses of suri fiber. Suri locks are unique and how many ways could they be incorporated in knitting without looking like the wearer belonged on another planet? The enmeshed suri on my baby boots appears to be like brushed suri but commercial brushed suri has been criticized for “falling apart”. My enmeshed suri has been through the washing machine and it didn’t fall apart. With more experimentation we would see if this suri fiber would hold up. There should be a market for washable suri fiber. I was not successful with my felting project with a two ply suri. That leads to the desire to develop a fat three ply yarn as well as a fat core spun suri fiber. And how many ways could we tinker with that?

It would be interesting to have a web site in which new ideas could be shared. It might include success stories, failures, and “we’ll know more when we finish our investigation”. In exploring the concept and production of rustic suri, failures are important to report because a failure for one person might provide exactly the right information that could lead to a success for another individual.

By developing a variety of suri products, we expand the market and opportunities for use of the fiber. Most suri owners are “hands on” kind of people. If only ten percent of them contributed new ideas and applications to the Suri Network product development committee, we would all benefit.

Suri alpaca has been described by a large commercial mill as “a fanciful yarn, full of personality and inspiration, a bundle of fuzzy goodness with unparalleled softness”. It’s just hard to disagree.