



Serious (and Silly) Swatching

Swatching gives more information than just gauge. It tells you how a yarn behaves and how fabrics made from it will feel.

Swatch No. 1

My basic swatch for any yarn is a square with a four-inch (10 cm) center in stockinette stitch (stocking stitch) and a narrow border all around of either garter stitch or seed stitch. I like seed stitch better, but I often default to garter because I get a little lazy.

Here's a sample chart for one of my basic swatches

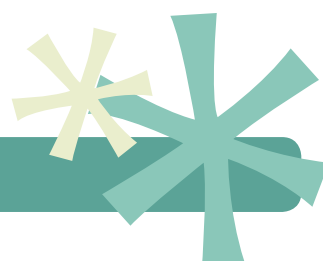
24	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	25
22	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	23
20	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	21
18	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	19
16	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	17
14	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	15
12	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	13
10	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	11
8	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	9
6	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	7
4	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	5
2	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	3
	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	1

- ☐ k1 on front side; p1 on reverse side
☒ p1 on front side; k1 on reverse side

The number of stitches in the center varies, depending on the gauge of the yarn. I just aim roughly to have four inches (10 cm) of plain stockinette in the middle. I don't worry much about this. I just cast on what looks like the right number of stitches and start knitting. I start with the border rows. Then I work the middle until it's roughly square, keeping three stitches at each edge in my border pattern. I finish with the same number of border rows as I began with, give or take one or two.

This is a swatch. It doesn't have to be perfect. It's laid-back knitting. I can do it anywhere and it needs very little attention. Sometimes I'll work another swatch on larger or smaller needles and see what I think of the results.

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Projects &
Patterns

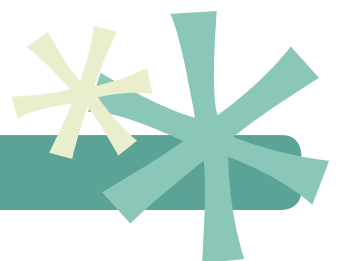
Serious (and Silly) Swatching



Here are my swatches of Suffolk clockwise from left: 2-ply doubled unwashed, 2-ply doubled hand washed, 2-ply doubled machine washed, 2-ply machine washed and 2-ply hand washed.

Tip: If I think I'll want to either machine wash the fabric or felt it, I'll knit two identical swatches with the same size needles, same number of stitches, and same number of rows. Then I keep one as a control and machine wash or felt the second one and compare my results.

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Swatch No. 2

My second swatch is for trying out a pattern, and it's a bit larger. (I may work more than one of these.) How much larger depends on the size of the pattern stitch, whether it involves stitch manipulation alone, color patterning alone, or a combination of the two.

To keep my pattern-testing swatches doable within a reasonable amount of time, I aim for about six inches (15 cm) in the center section. I always have at least two repeats of the pattern, and often three or more.

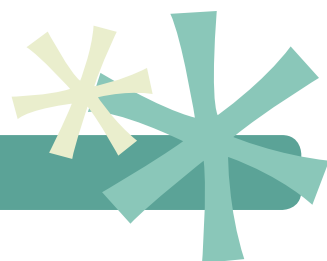
When I'm doing swatches just to learn about a yarn, I choose a different pattern stitch every time, so I don't get bored. I have a number of stitch dictionaries, and I browse through until I see something I like. Then I either chart it (if it hasn't been charted already) or I re-write the chart with my preferred symbols.

When I do these "second" swatches, I think about what I learned from the yarn in swatch No. 1 and will choose something to play with that seems like it will work, like:

- Lace
- Cables
- Combinations
- Texture stitches
- Ribbing
- Traveling stitches
- Fair Isle patterns
- Intarsia
- Anything else that feels fun

If it isn't fun, I don't finish! I reclaim my yarn and start over with something that will be fun!

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Finishing swatches

My normal washing routine for hand-knits involves warm water in the bathroom sink, with a couple of squirts of a liquid cleansing agent. I never run water directly on the fabric unless I'm trying to felt it. I gently press down the fabric so it's all wet, let it soak a few minutes, gently lift it out and squeeze (that doesn't mean wring) out the excess water, then rinse twice through the same process.

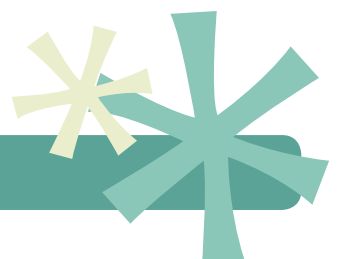
For a swatch, I squeeze out as much water as possible and then roll it, jelly-roll style, in a towel and then step on the towel-roll, rotate it a quarter turn, and step on it again. I unroll the swatch, lay it out on another dry towel, pat it into shape, and then leave it to dry.

For a larger piece, I put it in my washing machine on the spin-only cycle and spin the water out, then put it on a dry towel, pat it to shape, and leave it to dry. If the large piece has more than one layer of fabric (like a sweater), I'll come back in a few hours and turn it over, to give the underside an equal opportunity to dry.



Above: Karakul lamb's wool locks.

End





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Fingerless Gloves

Swatching can be serious, silly or even productive - instead of making a swatch, start a small project to play with your yarn, like fingerless gloves.

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Yarns

Corriedale (the white) and Black Welsh Mountain (the black) are both from Blacker Yarns. The Corriedale is British 4-ply, about fingering weight, and the Black Welsh Mountain is Aran weight (heavy worsted).

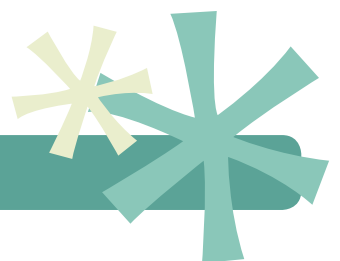
blackeryarns.co.uk

Pattern

"Silk-Merino Fingerless Gloves," by Andra Asars, in *Luxury One-Skein Wonders: 101 Small Indulgences*, edited by Judith Durant (Storey Publishing). Books in Storey's One-Skein Wonders series offer a lot of different possibilities for small projects to use for getting acquainted with yarns if you're allergic to the whole idea of swatching.

Also a variant of this pattern is available free on Ravelry:

ravelry.com/patterns/library/fingerless-gloves-with-petite-cables





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Good Ol' Wool Jacket

Yarn

100 percent wool yarn, not breed-specific (with a little mohair). A mix of Brown Sheep singles yarns, heavy worsted weight, in a variety of colors.

brownsheep.com

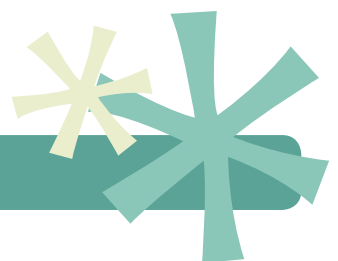
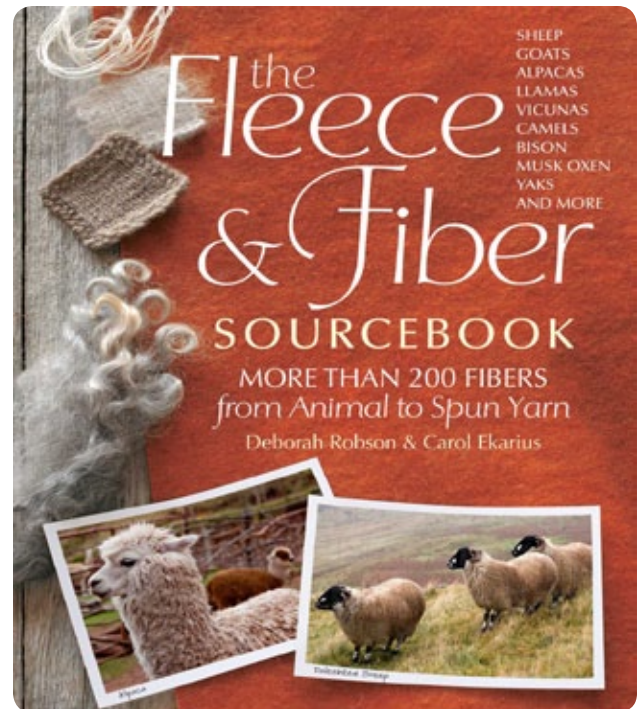
Mostly Top of the Lamb (100% wool) and Lamb's Pride (85% wool, 15% mohair).

The Jacket Pattern

Sandra McIver, Strata Sphere.

Book: *knit, Swirl: Uniquely Flattering One-Piece One-Seam Swirl Jackets*

knitswirl.com





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Fine Wool Shawls

Merino Cowl/Mini-Shawl in Merino

This cowl is a perfect example of a project for fine or soft wool.

Yarn

Hand-dyed Merino (superwash) light worsted-weight yarn, Blue Moon Fiber Arts Socks that Rock heavyweight sock yarn, 198 g (7 oz)/350 yards (320 m).

bluemoonfiberarts.com

The pattern calls for 350 yards, and it needs almost exactly that much. If your gauge is a little loose, you may need more.

Pattern

Sivia Harding, Harmonia's Rings.

<https://www.siviaharding.com/>

Merino Shawl

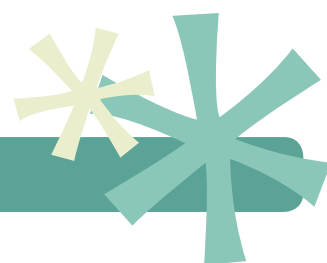
Yarn

Deb's hand-spun 2-ply, ending up between fingering and sportweight, made from Ashland Bay Multi-colored Merino top, colorway Midnight.

<https://www.ashlandbay.com/>

Pattern

"Knitted Triangular Lace Shawls," by Robert Powell, *Spin-Off*, Winter 1996, pages 30-37. (Out of print, not yet available in digital form.)





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Suffolk Sweater with Medium Wool

Yarn

Hand-dyed Suffolk worsted-weight 2-ply yarn, 100 g (3.5 oz)/196 yards (179 m), colorways Bluebell (semisolid) and Aqua (variegated).

mountainmeadowwool.com

Tip: Some medium wools, particularly from the Down breeds that originated in England, are so reluctant to felt that they can be machine-washed and -dried. Always test samples, but it's great when that's what you want!

Yarn worked double throughout; one strand of each in the body; two strands of Bluebell in the cuffs, ribbing, and back neck area.

Finished sweater machine washed and dried: I put the sweater in a large mesh bag for washing and put it in with our regular laundry (cold wash/rinse, regular long cycle). I took it out of the bag and put it in the dryer with our regular laundry (normal cycle). The fabric bloomed and became integrated and softer. The gauge was the same as when it was fresh off the needles.

Pattern

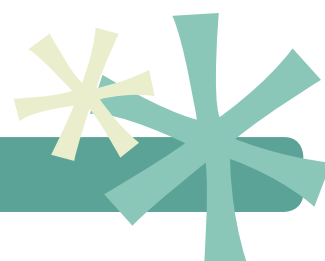
Lucy Neatby, Venus Rising cardigan.

www.lucyneatby.com/index.php?specific=1000254



Above: a Suffolk sheep.

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Long and Strong Wools

Bluefaced Leicester Socks: Yarn

Hand-dyed Bluefaced Leicester (superwash) sock yarn by Lisa Souza, 4 ounces/465 yards, colorway Forbidden City.

lisaknit.com/yarn/animalfibers/blueface-leicester-sock.htm

Pattern

Cat Bordhi, Simply Splendid, from Cat's Sweet Tomato Heel Socks.

catbordhi.com/category/books

Wensleydale Socks: Yarn

Commercially dyed Wensleydale aran-weight by Sheep Shop, Yorkshire, obtained from Flying Fibers.

flyingfibers.com

Pattern

Brenda Dayne, Tintern Abbey, from *Welsh for Rainbow*.

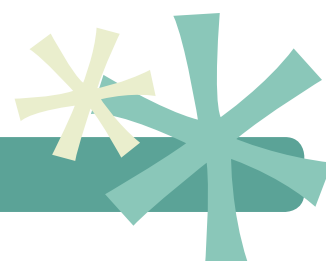
Tip: Socks as seen on the video were modified from the original pattern to custom fit.

Double-coated/Strong Wools

Middle Eastern Rug (Made from Karakul-type wools) and Navajo Saddle Blanket (Navajo-Churro) from the instructor's personal collection.



Above: a Karakul sheep.





Know Your Wool

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Supplies &
Resources

Wool Resources

Reference materials

- *The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook: More than 200 Fibers from Animal to Spun Yarn*, by Deborah Robson and Carol Ekarius. Storey Publishing, 2011.
- *Mason's World Dictionary of Livestock Breeds, Types, and Varieties*, by Valerie Porter and I.L. Mason. CABI Publishing, 2002.

Conservancy organizations

- American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, www.albc-usa.org
- Rare Breeds Survival Trust, www.rbst.org.uk

Noteworthy websites

- www.localharvest.org
- www.etsy.com
- www.ebay.com
- www.ravelry.com

Tip: Visit a shepherd, go to a wool festival or snoop around at your local farmers' market. You can also visit your local yarn shop and ask!

Shepherds, and wool and yarn sellers

- Brian Larson, Larson Lincolns, President, National Lincoln Sheep Breeders Assn., www.lincolnsheep.org
- Christiane Payton, North Valley Farm, Lincoln Breeder, www.northvalleyfarm.com
- Joanna Gleason, Gleason's Fine Woolies, Bond and Corriedale Breeder, www.gfwsheep.com
- The Natural Twist (Romney), Ruth Baldwin, www.thenaturaltwist.com
- Fiber Arts Republic (Gulf Coast Native, Black Welsh Mountain, Shetland handspun) Suzanne Correia, www.fireantranch.com
- Blacker Yarns, www.blackeryarns.co.uk
- Mountain Meadow Wool Mill, www.mountainmeadowwool.com
- Solitude Wool, www.solitudewool.com

Acknowledgments

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Suffolk and Rambouillet, Mountain Meadow Wool Mill
Columbia, Imperial Stock Ranch

