

A Brief but Pithy Tutorial for Spinning Merino

Merino wants to be spun fine. It begs to be spun fine. Big hunks of handspun merino are, in my opinion, really ugly and do the wool no justice at all. My first attempts at spinning on the wheel seven years ago were with the infamous merino/silk/angora blend that I bought in my ignorance. So I know from whence I speak. Merino is not for rank beginners.

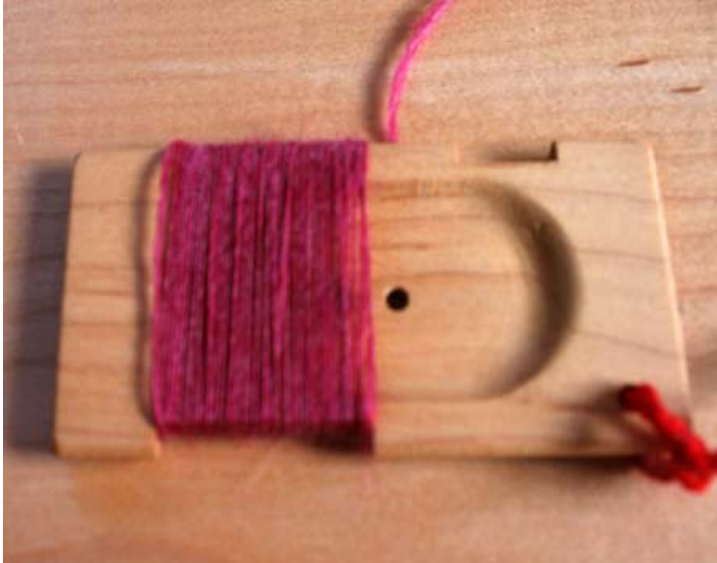
With that in mind, here are some salient points to consider when spinning merino:

- Choose the smallest ratio whorl you have. It's not necessary to buy the special high-speed whorl if that's an optional purchase.
- Make sure that the flyer is at a right angle to the maidens. This means **no tension**. At all. The whorl and your treadling will provide sufficient take-up.
- Make a new drive band. Whether you spin double-drive or with Scotch or Irish tensioning, you should always size the band to the whorl. You need not cut the old band off--just let it hang away from the wheel.
- In her book *Handspinning, Dyeing & Working with Merino and Superfine Wools*, Margaret Stove recommends that if using Scotch tensioning, you replace the brake spring with a fine rubber band because it is more responsive. I used the Schacht in double-drive mode; however, this seems like a good idea and I may try it with the Joy.
- Use a very fine wool yarn for your leader. Laceweight merino is good. And use a lot of it. You'll want a good yard or so of leader from the orifice to your hands. Getting the fiber to join the leader takes a bit of doing so you need a bit more leader than usual.
- It's helpful to spin onto a partially full bobbin. I first began with an empty bobbin and it was touch-and-go. The second bobbin had a small amount of Starry Night left on it, so I tied my leader to that--much easier.

- Use a worsted draw. Long draw ain't gonna work with merino because you can't control the twist as well.
- Finding the correct treadling speed takes some practice. I found that initially I was treadling too slowly and the fiber drifted apart. When I sped up my treadling, I went into overtwist and the single snapped. Merino is not forgiving. So practice your treadling speed first on a sample.
- Don't use big honkin' globs of fiber. Use small ones. They are more manageable. With the combed top, I did almost no predrafting; however, spinning from the fold works very well. I began each new join in this way, then switched the fiber into the palm of my hand.
- Don't hold the fiber mass at all. Support it with your hand. The fiber should just slide into the twist.
- Keep the twist from running away. If you lose control and it gets into the fiber, stop, open up the fiber mass and remove as much of the twist as you can. I thin out the twisted mass into the right thickness and then allow the twist to run up again. If you are hopelessly messed up, go back to a place in the single that is the correct diameter and start over with a new join.
- When making a join, begin by introducing a few wisps of the new into the old and pinch them into the single hard so they grab. Then slowly introduce more fiber into the twist, slowing your treadling if necessary and coaxing the new fiber into the old. This also takes a bit of practice but you can make a nice join if you are careful.
- If the single either drifts apart or snaps, and you have to retrieve it from the bobbin, find the end (Scotch tape works a treat if the end has disappeared) and carefully pull the single from the bobbin, keeping it under tension so that the twist stays put. And keep it under tension as you rethread it through the orifice.

- Take a sample of the single and let it twist back on itself so you have a guide for plying.

Here's a picture of the finished merino/tencel single, which is 40 wpi:



It's not a great picture but if you look at the end at the top, you can see how the twist is starting to dissipate. This is why handling active singles away from the bobbin needs to be done with tension.

Here's a better picture, which compares the merino/tencel single to a 2-ply sock yarn:



When I finally ply the merino/tencel, I'm figuring that I will add a considerable amount of twist to the ply, given that the spinning the single worked well that way. Merino loves to felt, so washing will be handled carefully. However, I'm always quite particular as to how I wash my plyed yarn--I never wring it but squeeze it gently and then snap the skein prior to drying. And I don't weight my yarn either. I might weight it lightly if I sold it but for my own purposes, it's fine the way it is.

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