



Hackles Up

Combing, colour and fibre blending on a hackle

By Jenny Hart

The wool hackle would have to be one of my favourite pieces of equipment - after the spinning wheel, of course!

A hackle is an additional tool for the hand spinner's tool kit - a versatile piece of equipment used to comb wool, open up and align fibres, remove noils and short fibres, and to blend different fibres and colours.

The fibre is removed from the hackle by passing it through a diz, a small concave shaped disc with one or more holes in it. This produces a continuous sliver that is quick and easy to spin.

When you see this piece of equipment you can understand the term 'to get your hackles up'! A hackle comprises two rows of steel tines (prongs) usually around 100mm (4in) long, set vertically into a solid wood base. Not for the faint hearted! The hackle is clamped to a table when in use.

Styles of hackles can vary quite a lot. I bought my first hackle from a maker in Marlborough over 10 years ago. It has two rows of 100mm (4in) tines set on an angle. Majacraft manufacture a hackle with two rows of 70mm (2 ¾in) tines set vertically. The only difference I notice between the two is that I can load more onto the angled hackle because of the longer tines. Majacraft have made wooden blocks for both hackles to protect both the tip of the tines and the user. I will often put the blocks on while drawing the fibre off. There is the temptation to reach for something behind the hackle and it can inflict a nasty scratch.

You will see many other styles advertised in overseas magazines. You could make your own diz from any number of concave shaped items - a shell off the beach, the corner of an ice-cream container, a piece of plastic pipe, a button or a bead.

LOADING THE HACKLE

The method of loading the hackle is to lash the fibre onto it with a small amount behind the tines. If you are using pre prepared fibre, lash on and then give a sharp pull to break off approximately 100mm of fibre in front of the tines. As you load the hackle, press the fibre down towards the base of the tines. Continue to layer along and up the hackle in this manner.

COMBING LOCKS OF WOOL

This works best with scrupulously clean staples, 100mm (4in) long or more. To open up the staples, take washed locks of fleece and flick the tip end and the butt end on the hackle. Alternatively you could flick card or comb the staples of wool. Lash onto the hackle by pulling the butt



end over the tines, just behind the back row of tines (*fig.1*). Push fibre to the base of the tines. Continue loading the hackle. Draw the fibre off the hackle using a diz. This will give a long sliver with the fibres aligned ready for worsted spinning. Noils and short cuts will be left behind the tines of the hackle.

Remember the fibre will spin more easily if you spin starting from the end closest to the hackle (the butt, end of the staple). If you've forgotten which is the butt end, roll the fibre gently up and down between your thumb and forefinger. The fibre will slowly 'walk' through your fingers towards the tip of the staple (*fig.2*).

DIZZING OFF HINTS

The huge advantage with dizzing fibre off the hackle is that both hands are free because the hackle is clamped to the table. Gather the fibre gently into a point. With the concave side of the diz facing the hackle, pull a small amount of fibre through the hole in the diz with a fine crochet hook. Pull just enough fibre through the hole in the diz so it runs easily and not so much that it jams (*fig.3*).

Use both hands alternately to push the diz towards the hackle and pull the fibre towards yourself. If you have the diz too close to the hackle it will be hard to pull fibre through, too far away and the sliver may become too thin and the diz will fall to the floor. Note the average length of the fibre you are using and keep the diz slightly further than that length away from the hackle.

The same applies to your hand action. If your hands are too close together you will not be able to draw the yarn through. Too far apart and the sliver will break. Pull the fibre at a slight angle to the hackle.

Don't discard the waste short fibre and noils yet.

BLENDING FIBRES

I really like the control I have over the blending of fibres on a hackle. It is a gentle process which will not damage or break very fine fibres.

Commercial fibres can be put straight onto the hackle but if you are using fleece, prepare the staples as mentioned above. Layer the different fibres of your choice onto the hackle in alternating rows.

This first pass may not be particularly well blended. Break the sliver you have produced into short lengths and lash onto the hackle again. You may wish to alternate the strips end to end. This is called 'planking'. Repeat the process until you have the fibres as blended as you wish.

Diz the fibre off the hackle.

Note: I have found that if the fibres are more than 3-4cm different in length it is difficult to get a consistent blend.

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Above and below: Blending fibres



BLENDING COLOURS

I use pre-prepared fibres for this. There are many options and you are limited only by your imagination.

Consider the hackle loading options. These include:

- Layers – horizontal or vertical.
- Thick layers or thin or a combination.
- Blocks or triangles of colour.
- How many colours? Contrasting, primary, analogous colour. Intensity of colour.

Now you have the dizzing options.

- Using larger or smaller diz holes will give a different result.
- The direction in which the diz is moved will also change the look of the sliver. Try weaving back and forth, up and down, or randomly, to pick up colours of choice.



Unrepeatable and unpredictable - what could be more fun?



Colour Blending

PLANNING A PROJECT

There are always leftovers of fibre from previous projects lingering, unloved, in baskets in my studio. Sorting them into pleasing colour combinations has resulted in yarns called 'Serendipity', 'Studio Clean Up' etc. 'Studio Clean Up' also used some of the so-called discard fibres – remember, I said earlier not to throw them away. I put these into a jar with holes punched in the lid. Held firmly between my knees, I can pluck out very small quantities to drop into the yarn as I am spinning. These are unrepeatable and rather unpredictable yarns but huge fun.

If you are planning to blend fibres or colours on a hackle for a project:

- ~ Consider how much yarn you will need.
- ~ Weigh a similar article to get an idea of the amount you will need.
- ~ Weigh and plan each batch of blending so you can repeat the process.
- ~ Each load will take approximately 50-75gm. Weigh each of the components of your load and make a note of them for future reference.
- ~ Also note down the order of loading the hackle and the dizzing off action you've used.



Planning batches of fibre

The most important piece of advice – relax and have fun!

REFERENCES

Color In Spinning – Deb Menz

Hand Woolcombing and Spinning – Peter Teal

Spin Off Magazine – Spring 1999, Spring 2007

SUPPLIER OF DIZ AND HACKLE

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