

Are You Up to the Challenge of “Senior” Fleece?

Judy Ross, Good News Llamas

As llama breeders many of us have worked diligently to improve the quality of fleece in our herd. We have gone from classic and double coat llamas to single, suri, Argentine, even silky! One common thread for all llama owners is the aging herd. We all have older llamas on our farms. Comments that I hear a lot are, my llamas are getting older and the fleece is getting more course; I just don't have a use for it anymore so I have bags from several years or I am just throwing it away; The color is changing - there is now lots of white/gray guard hairs; Processing is expensive it is getting hairy and I can't afford dehairing. I can't sell my roving since it's no longer soft or silky.

Many of us still have classic and double coated llamas on our farms. We now shear necks, shoulders, and hips full of guard hair. Our younger llamas produce soft wonderful fiber that can be shown in shorn fleece classes and used for any purpose. As we are seeing our llamas age there tends to be an increase in guard hair and a loss of hand and fineness. What happens to this fleece?

As I looked around my herd I realized many of my llamas are getting older as well. I looked at the bags of fleece I have on hand and asked, can I still use the fleece from my senior llamas? What are my options? Dehairing (removing guard hairs) can be very pricey. I could have rugs or felt fabric made but again that can be expensive. I decided to do a project to see what you can do with older “senior” llama fleeces.

Since I don't feel I was born with the creative gene, I decided to enlist the help of our local fiber guild, The River Cities Fiber Clan. Seven very talented, creative members eagerly decided to help and see what could be done with what most fiber folk would consider unusable fleece. I gave them portions of fleeces that were felted and matted neck fiber, very old felted roving from my stash, a fleece from a 16 year old llama, fleece that was a mix of very long and very short fibers and some had other problems. The challenge was to take the fleece and create something with.

The fleece samples were all from the Good News Llama herd. All the animals were more than ten years old and the quality varied. Each volunteer was given information on the llama and type of fleece (single, suri, double, etc.) Some of the participants had limited experience working with llama fleece while others had none. Each volunteer would have two months to create something of their own design using the llama fiber. The fleece could be dyed, spun, felted, knitted, anything they desired to make something useable out of “unusable” fleece. The only rule was not to blend with other fibers, but they could be used as embellishments. The ladies were asked to document the techniques used, any pros/cons of working with senior llama fleece, and to be creative!

Since I love to dye fiber and make batts, I also wanted to see how the fiber would do in the dye process. Four ladies were up to the challenge. They would take samples of llama (double, single, suri), alpaca (suri), sheep, and mohair. They were to be dyed in the same pot, same dye amount, and same processing time to see how each fiber would react to the dye. They could use either natural or commercial dyes. Wilton icing dyes, Easter egg coloring, Rit, Pro Chemical, Cushings and a variety of natural dye items was used. Photos and results are shared on the project web site.

The projects turned out great! We had felting, creating art pieces, needle felting, spinning, and knitted items. Pictures were taken before and after to document the creative process and results. The complete project photos, techniques and comments can be viewed at www.goodnewsllamas.com click on the **Senior Fleece Project link**.



Before, very matted double coat felted neck



After, nice use of guard hair for the tail



Before, felted/matted various locks



After, dye , wet and needle felted flowers

Here are some findings from our experiences. Even the most matted or felted fleece can be used for something. With a little creativity and ingenuity you can take a hairy, matted fleece and make some needle felted fish. You can take some matted locks and make some lovely felted flowers. You can take an older silky fleece and make a wonderful nuno felted scarf. You can paint with your fleece to make beautiful, dimensional wall hangings. You can needle felt figures or designs on knitted or felted fabric. You can use hairy fleece or yarns in weaving projects for texture or interest. You can use guard hairs to tie fishing flies. You can use matted curls/locks for doll hair. You can make felted soap scrubbers or bootliners from course fleece. You can use fleece in multimedia art pieces or collages. Even the worst fleece you can imagine has a use as garden mulch, food for worm growers, or bird nest balls.

We all know that not all fleeces will produce something you can wear close to your skin and not all fleeces will felt. While the beautiful natural colors can be inviting it is important to choose the right fleece for your end product. You wouldn't want a garment for close to your skin made from a classic fleece that hasn't been dehaired. As animals naturally shed, our end product will lose hairs or fibers at times.

What are some ways you can get others interested in llama fleece? Contact your local fiber/knitting guilds, and see if they want to experiment with llama fleece/yarn. You can ask local 4H groups to work a creative llama project and provide a prize for the most creative use. You can provide contact information at local fishing or outdoor shops for material for ties and/or felted boot liners. Have a llama day at your farm or a local park and introduce people to llama fiber. You can get people involved and let their creativity come out.

Is senior llama fleece useable? YES!!! You can use senior llama fleece in many ways limited only by your imagination and time.

Judy Ross – has Good News Llamas and Back Porch Fibers with her husband Tom. Since her retirement in 2012 she has been inspired to change her mounds of fleece stash into beautiful roving, batts or finished products for a budding fiber business. Judy is a spinner, felter, and dyer. She is currently working on her weaving, needle and nuno felting skills. She is a long time fleece show participant and an ALSA/ILR-SD llama fleece judge and instructor. Please visit the website for more information on llama fleece, fiber projects and instruction – goodnewsslamas.com