

wool works

I learnt to spin while living on my parents' farm, Botobolar Vineyard, in Mudgee in central NSW in 1974. We had merino ewes and a border Leicester ram, and I spun the wool from our cross-bred sheep. These days my favourite wool is 22 micron merino. I got my first strong merino fleece from Collinsville stud, in 1988. It was a beautiful fleece. More recently I got a wonderful fleece from my relatives, Lyn and Gordon Litchfield, Wilpoorinna Station near Maree in South Australia. I have also had good coloured fleeces from Ulan, near Mudgee. My favourites came from twin brothers, Zac who had pitch black wool and Zeb who had champagne-coloured fleece.

I first dyed wool at Botobolar, using the leaves of the yellow box, *Eucalyptus melliodora*. I boiled the leaves for an hour, filling the house with a wonderful smell, then adding the wool. Nothing happened for nearly an hour, the wool was an unappealing khaki, then suddenly it turned orange, and became a deep burnt orange. I was hooked.

I have experimented with many eucalypts, and none come close to yellow box, with the possible exception of *E. sideroxylon*. Beginners luck. I have kept records of my experiments going back over 30 years. My staples are brown onion skins (deep orange with alum as a mordant), tansy flowers (a light bright yellow with alum), dandelion leaves and comfrey leaves (turns various hues of gray-green depending on time of year and age of leaf when mordanted with alum and then how long you leave it in with the iron mordant at the end) and walnut husks (the fibrous covering over the shell give a wonderful chocolate brown). I usually dye a series of hanks of wools, so I have several shades of the colour. Failed experiments usually get over-dyed with brown onion skins.

The best reference I have found is *Wild Colour*, by Jenny Dean, published by Mitchell Beazley, 1999. I bought it from Florilegium bookshop in Glebe. It is an English book, but most of the plants can be found here. I even managed to get some woad seeds, desperate as I am for blue, but despite following Jenny Dean's complicated recipe, ended up with the wool being light blue for just a brief period. The final colour was pale pink. I suspect Sydney is not cold enough for blue-producing woad.

During the mid 1970s I made my living spinning and knitting jumpers. It was a modest, but independent income.

In the 1990s my wrists suffered terribly from working long hours, under pressure, at the computer. My physiotherapist was amused by my well-developed spinning and knitting muscles, a nice rounded bump at my wrist, unique to those who have spent countless hours at the wheel or clicking the needles. Despite her frequent treatments I thought I would never knit again.

Then I discovered Iyengar Yoga.

These days I most enjoy designing and knitting bunny rugs. No fiddly fitting of sleeves and picking up neck bands. Instead I can concentrate on design, and play with the colours I have dyed. My designs are influenced by Amish quilts, but each rug is different, usually knitted with the recipient in mind. I don't spin as much as I used to, it is hard on the back and shoulders, and I have found a factory that will spin up single fleeces.

Here is a small gallery of rugs I have made.

Skeins of wool drying in the sun. Grace's rug. Gustav's rug. Ronan's rug. Otto's rug. Gustaf and Margaretta's rug. Zac and Clancy in their rugs.

Lyn's rug.