

Spinning Flax

Arranging flax fibres for spinning using a distaff.

The arrangement of fibres on the distaff is important for producing well spun yarn. There are many ways in which this can be done and different distaffs influence the choice of method. Basically fibres can 1. hang straight down vertically, 2. they can criss-cross over each other or 3. they can be arranged horizontally round the distaff. This process is called '*dressing the distaff.*'

In this workshop we will use the method where the fibres are diagonally criss-crossed over each other and this choice is based on the type of distaff we have available. We shall be spinning fibres from a 'strick' which are bundles of 'line' flax (the longest fibres from the flax plant).

From every angle of the arrangement, as the fibres are drafted they turn to face the point of twist and need to be parallel as they receive twist from the wheel to make a smooth yarn.

For more information on 'dressing a distaff,' go to the 'Following On from Flax Spinning' handout.

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Treadling

Before starting to spin, however experienced, practise treadling slowly and evenly.

Distaff

Have your dressed distaff on your left hand side.

Water pot

Find a convenient place between the distaff and the orifice for a water pot. Place a small piece of sponge into the pot and add enough warm water to keep the sponge well saturated. Replenish from time to time with more warm water. Some spinners like to use a light jelly made from flax seed or carrageen moss. It can help if difficulty is found in making the fibres adhere but not everyone likes the slimy feel of it. Patricia Baines 'Linen – Handspinning and Weaving' gives a recipe for this 'jelly' on page 51.

Starter Yarn

It is generally accepted that flax is spun 'S' direction, although some find the spinning 'Z' makes little difference. Make sure your leader yarn was spun in the same

direction as you plan to spin the flax. A linen or cotton leader is deemed best to use for a leader but wool will work okay.

To start spinning – S twist

Place the starter/leader yarn at a slanting angle round the fibres to the distaff in a clockwise direction. At the point where the leader first crosses the fibres, grasp the yarn and a few fibres from the bottom of the fibre arrangement between the dampened thumb and first two fingers of the left hand. As treadling commences (wheel turning in an anti-clockwise direction for S spun), the yarn is drawn towards the orifice (adjust the brake band if this happens too quickly/too slowly).

Because the left hand is controlling the fibres, drafting and smoothing, a better control is achieved if the yarn is in contact with the first three fingers. A tension is kept on the yarn as it passes over the third finger, thus holding back the twist while the fibres are drafted. The thumb should be against the extreme tip of the index finger.

As drafting commences, the thumb rolls across the index finger, there is no twist in the fibres, making it possible to see and select exactly the quantity of fibres lying in the elongated triangle which is to make the length of yarn.

The hand moves down towards the orifice and the wrist turns slightly towards this with some tension on the fibres. The draw down will be as long as possible while making sure that the ends of the drafted fibres are still in contact with the flax and the distaff.

With the fibres drafted, release the tension from the third finger but do not let go of the yarn. Just allow the twist to slip through the fingers into the yarn, at the same time as moving the hand back towards the distaff, smoothing the fibre ends into the twist by rolling the thumb back along the index finger. The hand is then positioned to restart drafting. The rolling movement of the thumb is against the direction of the twist coming from the wheel with the tension on the yarn transferred back to the third finger.

When it is necessary to re-dampen the left hand fingers, transfer the yarn to the right hand to hold back the twist after drafting and before smoothing, always keeping the treadling rhythm the same. Dampen the left hand fingers and use them to smooth moving quickly up the yarn followed by the right hand if you wish.

The idle right hand can cross over the left hand to keep fibres tidy on the distaff pulling away any that interfere with drafting and holding back any that come down too quickly. Handle the fibres with care and do not attempt to pull the fibres back up on to the distaff since it will cause knots and tangles which need to be picked out. Flax comes down too quickly if: a) a newly dressed distaff was not tidy; b) the fibres were not carefully separated when being prepared; c) too many fibres were pulled out when drafting.

As spinning progresses work round the distaff, turning it as necessary so that there is always a fibre supply at the same comfortable position for the left hand. Always select from the top layer of fibres at the lowest point. NB. If the bottom edge was turned up to neaten, the fibres are drafted from a little higher up to avoid pulling down the tucked up edge.

The most common faults during the learning period of spinning flax are:

- The yarn becoming thinner and thinner until it parts company with the fibre supply. This is due to the left hand not smoothing the full length of the yarn right up closet to the fibres on the distaff.
- A thick hairy, rope like yarn, due to lack of drafting and failing to control the twist, thus allowing it to enter the fibres on the distaff.
- Attempting to join two broken ends. Any half spun yarn should be discarded, then start afresh using the end of spun yarn coming from the bobbin as the starter yarn.

Winding the bobbin evenly

The bobbin must be filled as evenly as possible. It is important to move the yarn on the flyer hooks not to the adjacent hook but 2-3 on creating a criss-crossing of yarn. Ridges of yarn on the bobbin must be avoided as far as possible otherwise the end gets lost and disappears completely. As the yarn is wet it sticks down and can't be found! A tooth brush can be used to tease the end out but be careful not to cause the fibres to all stand up again! If this is a recurring problem place a narrow strip of paper over the spun yarn lengthways across the bobbin from time to time to act as a lifeline. Check your drafting if this happens a lot!

Tension

The tension should be such that there is a regular pull to the yarn. Increase the tension as the bobbin fills if necessary. The tension should be present as the twist travels up the fibres as you move back to draft, otherwise the fibres like to fold back on themselves and cause bumps and unevenness.

Moving the flax

When the bottom of the distaff is emptied of fibres, instead of stretching up for more, untie the ribbon and with both hands grasping the bottom of the fibre arrangement pull it down. It will be necessary to move the fibre down several times in emptying the distaff. Re-tie the ribbon each time! If, towards the end, the fibre tightens onto the distaff and is difficult to dislodge, push both hands between the fibre arrangement and the distaff and ease out the mass by pushing outwards with the hands, after which it will slip more easily down the distaff.

The above information is taken from Patricia Baines, 'Linen -Handspinning and Weaving,' 1989, Bath Press ISBN 0 7134 4779 6

Finishing linen yarn.

Once spun the yarn will need 'finishing,' which means removing the pectin and starting the softening and whitening process.

Method for a finishing linen yarn (Also from Patricia Baines book):

Use a pan that is solely for textile use [I use my dye pans]. Weigh out 50% soap flakes* to dry weight of yarn, plus 3% washing soda to yarn weight. For hard water areas add 3 % water softener. Boil for 30 mins. Rinse in hot water first then cold, to remove the pectins. The yarn may still feel a little stiff at this stage. It will soften with use and further washes.

Alternatively, Liz has used washing up liquid and soda or now usually pops it through several hot washes in the washing machine. I use washing powder detergent, washing soda and a quarter descale tab (that I use for my washing machine) in about the same proportions as Patricia Baines method and boil for 25 mins. All equally effective.

*I have found soapflakes for sale in old fashioned hardware stores and once I found it in Wilkos.

A note on shrinkage

Also remember Liz's experiment where two linen samples were knitted exactly the same and one of them was then washed in the washing machine. The washed sample increased in length but shrank in width compared to the non-washed sample. This will be important in deciding whether to finish your yarn before or after making up.