

# Blending Colors at the Wheel

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Photos by Joe Coca

**Spin Off**  
e P A T T E R N S

# Blending Colors at the Wheel

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**W**ith the current multitude of fiber arts events and access to fibers on the Internet, it is an easy task to find wonderful fibers ready to spin. There are rovings, batts, and tops in a rainbow of colors, both solid and mixed. When I wander the vendor aisles at a fiber festival, I can't help but purchase fiber. To minimize the effect on my pocketbook, I usually buy small amounts (4 to 8 ounces) of a given fiber, and thus my stash grows. The drawback of this approach is that I often find myself with not enough of a particular fiber to make a large project, such as a sweater.

Early in my spinning life, I had a spinning wheel but few other tools—no handcards, no combs, no drumcarder. Being so minimally equipped, I tried to extend my fiber stash by combining fibers without those tools. My process was simply to predraft two rovings or tops together. The benefits were many—I got greater amounts of yarn for larger projects; I got yarns that were unique because of my blending choices; and the resulting yarns produced very interesting textural effects in my knitting due to various fiber and color blends. Blending at the wheel is a simple way to get interesting results that are not typically found in millspun yarns, and it is also a way of making several different but related yarns for a single project.

In the past couple of years, I have made many blended yarns. The resulting yarns varied and were dependent on several factors: (1) How similar the fiber sources were in coarseness and fiber length; (2) whether the fiber sources were combed or carded; (3) whether the yarn I made was a singles yarn or plied; (4) whether the yarn was thick or thin; (5) how consistently I blended colors within a single skein; (6) the contrast or closeness of color hue and value; and (7) the relative percentages of the blended fibers.

## THE SAMPLES

For all the examples presented, I prepared the fibers before spinning by predrafting. To predraft, I gently pull lengthwise along the roving or top to loosen the fibers and then make the fiber source thinner while maintaining a consistent thickness. All the singles yarns were spun with a Z-twist. All the two-ply yarns were spun Z and plied S. Sometimes I spun on my Reeves upright wheel, sometimes I spun on my Louet S10. I did all the plying on the Louet.

## Thunderstorm

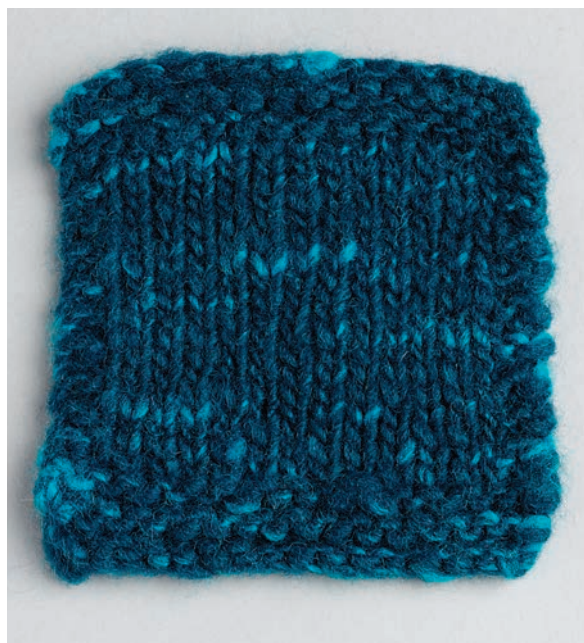
This yarn was the first that I made by predraft blending. I had two 8-ounce balls of Columbia/Romney carded roving. One was light gray, the other



was a blend of teal blue and black. Both fibers were from the same vendor so the rovings were similar in thickness, and the fiber content was essentially the same. I broke off about 2 feet of roving from each of the two sources, held them side by side, and predrafted them together as if they were one source. Because I didn't want a perfectly uniform blend, I tried to ignore how the colors blended as I predrafted. I then created a two-ply yarn. Adding the light gray to the already existing blend of blue/black created a yarn that was visually active to me; the contrast of color value of the light gray and darker colors seems to give a sense of motion to the knitted fabric. I ended up with eight skeins of the yarn—enough for a substantive project.

### Teal for Two

Here is a singles yarn—the teal is a Columbia/Romney wool, the turquoise is Romney wool roving. I estimated that I had enough fiber to make four skeins (about 8 ounces total) with more teal than turquoise. I wanted these skeins to be consistent enough in color blending that they could be used in a single project. For this yarn, I got out my scale (Ohaus Scout II). I made four piles of fiber, each containing a quarter of the teal and a quarter of the turquoise. In each pile, there was much more teal than turquoise, so I predrafted the fibers in two stages. First, I took the turquoise alone and predrafted it, with minimal concern for consistent thickness, to make it the same length as the teal roving. Next, I held the teal and roughly drafted turquoise side by side and predrafted them together.



The resulting yarn appeared to be a teal with highlights of turquoise. The knitted swatch, likewise, has a certain depth or three-dimensionality that the solid teal alone would not have had.

### Cinnamon Swirl

For this yarn, I used two other colors of the Columbia/Romney wool roving. (This is an easy fiber to spin; I use it for teaching beginning spinning. My friend Carol Salerno says it's like comfort

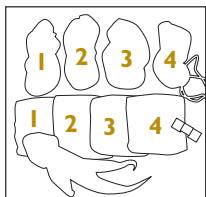


food, so I call it macaroni-and-cheese spinning.) One roving was a light tan and the other a blend of mostly rust with a bit of brown. I only had an ounce or so of the rust fiber but more of the tan. With these two fibers, I created a loosely spun, lopi-style singles yarn, with some variation in yarn thickness throughout. I knew I didn't have enough fiber to make much yarn, so I decided in advance that I would make only two skeins. Before predrafting, I divided the tan roving into two chunks roughly equal in length. I did the same for the rust. Now I had much more tan than rust. When I predrafted, I started with the tan and randomly added bits of the rust, so that the percentage of tan to rust varied a lot along the length of the yarn. The intermittent spacing of the darker rust fiber against the backdrop of the lighter tan fiber created an interesting visual effect in the resulting yarn and knitted swatch; the swatch makes me think of geological stratifications in sandstone. The two skeins were reasonably similar, but not perfectly so.



### Cranberry Freckle

For this yarn, I combined two more Columbia/Romney wool rovings—a dark cranberry and a periwinkle. I decided to make a two-ply yarn, with one ply of solid cranberry and the other ply an equal blend (by weight) of the cranberry and periwinkle. I used my scale again for dividing fibers. I first weighed out the periwinkle: I only had about 2¼ ounces total. At that point I decided to make three skeins of yarn, so I divided the periwinkle into thirds (¾ ounce each). I then weighed out the more plentiful cranberry—three piles of ¾ ounce (i.e., equal to the periwinkle) and three piles of 1½ ounces. For each skein of yarn, I first spun one 1½-ounce pile of cranberry onto one bobbin. I then spun another bobbin combining ¾ ounce of cranberry with ¾ ounce of periwinkle, predrafting these colors together as I did for Teal for Two by making the rovings the same length and then predrafting them together. I then plied the two bobbins of singles yarns. The resulting yarn and knitted swatch appeared fairly evenly speckled.



**Right:** Opposites Attract.

long fibers. For this yarn, I blended two sources of Wensleydale wool (a long-stapled and lustrous wool). I purchased these fibers as combed top rather than carded roving. In my stash I had about 8 ounces of Wensleydale top that had been dyed in a lovely combination of blues with a hint of purple. I weighed out an equal amount of undyed white Wensleydale top. I split the blue into ten sections of about ¾ ounce each and the white into ten ¾-ounce sections. For each of five skeins, I predrafted and spun equal amounts of blue and white together onto two bobbins and then plied the singles together. This yarn knitted up into a fabric that has quite a bit of motion to it.



### Delft

This technique of blending is also successful with



### Opposites Attract

Here are some samples illustrating different percentages of blends. In these samples, the colors are quite disparate in value (one is light, the other dark). The tan roving is Columbia/Romney wool. The dark green roving is Corriedale/Coopworth/Border Leicester. I spun four different lopi-style singles. These yarns are extremely loosely spun and would be suitable to knit and then full. The four yarns are: 1) 100% green; 2) 100% tan; 3) 70% green, 30% tan (by weight); 4) 30% green, 70% tan. The percentages of dark to light values makes quite a difference in the visual texture in the knitted swatches.

### Melons Unite

For this sample, I blended two fiber sources that are quite close in value. I also created a two-ply yarn that was a bit thinner than the previous examples.



I used two Merino wool tops: one a solid orange and the other a color blend in the yellow/green family. I blended equal amounts (by weight) of the two fibers. Because of the closeness in value of the two fiber sources and the thinner yarn, the knitted result yields subtle color variations, with less of a textural impression than some of the other yarns. Still, the result is intriguing.

It is satisfying to get such interesting and unique results from such a simple method. Through my experimentation, I've decided that the technique seems to work best when the two blended fiber sources are similar in coarseness, fiber length, and preparation. It also helps to use a scale to weigh the fibers to create yarn that is qualitatively consistent from skein to skein. It was equally easy to use this technique with carded rovings and combed tops; the effects produced in the knitted fabrics varied with value and color contrast, and with relative percentages of the two fiber sources. I found that the color variations were more dramatic in the thick, singles yarns and more subtle in thin and plied yarns. ❧

Amy Tyler follows her fiber muse in beautiful Benzie County, Michigan, in the northwest corner of the lower peninsula. Under the business name, Stone Sock Fibers, she works to create knit designs that exploit handspinning techniques.

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## FIBER SOURCES

Columbia/Romney wool rovings from Pat Tirrell, Tirrell Centennial Farm, 700 Tirrell Rd., Charlotte, MI 48813. (517) 543-7395; [tirrellpat@hotmail.com](mailto:tirrellpat@hotmail.com).

Romney wool roving from Heartland Natural Fibers, 630 West Elkhorn St., Arlington, NE 68002. (402) 478-4356; [ostrom@genesinet.net](mailto:ostrom@genesinet.net).

Merino blended colors from Mielke's Fiber Arts, 3086 Cty. Rd. PP, Rudolph, WI 54475. (715) 435-4494; [www.mielkesfarm.com](http://www.mielkesfarm.com).

White Wensleydale wool top from Haltwhistle Fibres, Ann Arbor, MI. [weaverlady@sbcglobal.net](mailto:weaverlady@sbcglobal.net); [www.geocities.com/weaverlady2003](http://www.geocities.com/weaverlady2003).

Dyed Wensleydale wool top from Lisa Souza Knitwear and Dyeworks, 4550 Newtown Rd., Placerville, CA 95667. (530) 647-1183; [lisa@lisaknit.com](mailto:lisa@lisaknit.com); [www.lisaknit.com](http://www.lisaknit.com).

Corriedale/Coopworth/Border Leicester raw fleece from Marie Glaesemann, Church Road Farm, Duluth, MN. Processed into roving by Stonehedge Fiber Mill, Debbie McDermott, 2246 Pesek Rd., East Jordan, MI 49727. (231) 536 2779; [deb@stonehedgefibermill.com](mailto:deb@stonehedgefibermill.com); [www.stonehedgefibermill.com](http://www.stonehedgefibermill.com). Dyed by Carol Salerno, Honor, MI.