

My Way, Not the Only Way

There are as many ways to felt as there are felters that do it, and no matter what someone might tell you, there is no wrong way to do it, either. (GASP!) As long as you are pleased with the results, it's fine. Really.

So, this is my way, not the only way, to felt a fleece. Bear with me, because this is a LONG tutorial. Heck, it's a long process! Expect to spend several hours (and possibly a gallon or two of sweat) on this project. The first part of the process needs to be done in one fell swoop, but once you start felting, you can take a break if needed.

I'd recommend starting small—maybe a half fleece for a pet bed. It will help you learn the process, and won't be so overwhelming.



Finished Rug

Supplies you will need:

- A place to work—I prefer outside, because then I'm not worried about the mess I'm going to make
- A fleece
- Table
- Bed Risers
- Tarp
- Curtain Sheer
- Soap (I like Dawn)
- Roving/Batting for backing (about a pound, depending on your fleece)
- Hot water/cold water
- Bucket, spray bottle or sprinkler
- Large tub (for washing)
- Felting needle/felting needle surface (optional)
- Heavy thread or yarn and darning needle (optional)
- Patience and determination

Supplies—fleece!

Fleece for felting—it's purty, right?

This is a Shetland fleece with nice lock definition. I look for one that has separate locks. Some breeds don't felt well, so start with one that will. Shetlands are a great first felting fleece, because they are usually inexpensive, felt reasonably well, and generally aren't too big, making for a manageable project. This fleece was (after skirting) about 2.5 pounds.

I like to start with a fleece that is still mostly together, but you can use one that is more separated or even parts from different fleeces.

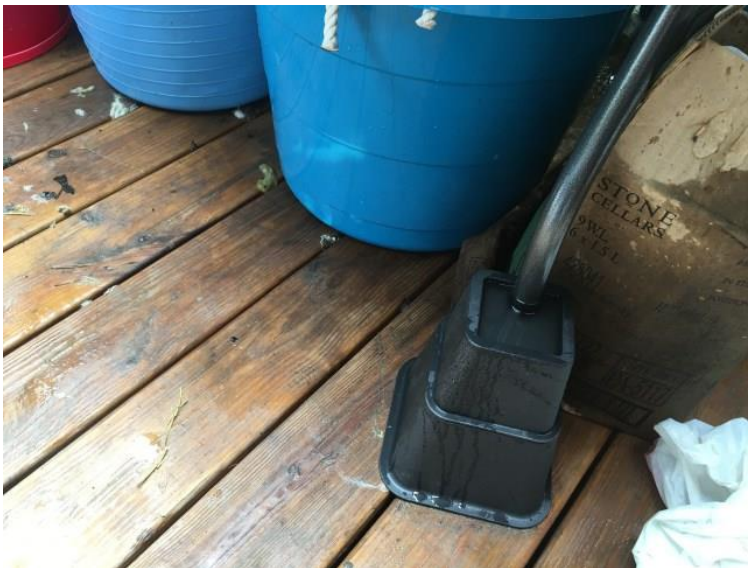


Supplies: A table (or tables)

(Pay no attention to the tubs of neglected fleece under the table waiting to be washed)

This is one of those plastic folding tables. I use them for shows, and they are handy to have around. This one is a 5' table bought at Wal-Mart. If it is a large fleece, I will push two tables together. You can do this on the ground, but, my back! (Not to mention my knees!)

Supplies-bed risers.



Inexpensive bedrisers—these are an extra-tall set I'm tall, and raising up the height of the table to do all this work is a back-saver. This is a higher-than-normal set because I'm taller than normal, (and, my back!) but the regular-height ones you can find in the laundry or bedding section of most stores work great.

Supplies: a tarp (see the table picture)

Basic blue tarp. Nice and cheerful, isn't it?

This makes washing the table easier. If you are using two tables, this keeps the fleece out of the seam between them. Also good for disguising the mess underneath the table

Supplies: Net/Sheer Curtain

Forgot to take a picture of this before I wet it down.

Whoops.

Pictured here is a cheap (\$4) curtain sheer from Wal-mart, but you can find them at thrift stores, too. They come in many colors, and can be easily torn into smaller pieces if needed. This keeps the fleece from shifting too much as you start felting.

**Supplies: Liquid Soap**

Basic Dawn

I like Dawn. You are going to use a lot of it, so this isn't the place for an expensive fleece wash. Keep in mind you are not just felting, you are washing the fleece at the same time. Not pictured—hot water. I have a hot water tap next to my work area, so I use that. You can use a bucket, a plant sprayer, a squirt bottle—whatever works for you. The water needs to be fairly hot. You can also use an electric kettle or portable electric burner to heat up water.

Supplies: Roving or a carded batt*Roving*

The roving or batt is used on the back of the fleece to give the cut ends something to felt to, and provides a backing. Some people use only Merino, but I have found that it can felt to itself before it felts to my fleece. This is Shetland roving, which is a nice in-between from merino to coarser felting rovings, and it comes in a lot of natural colors.

Now, this is a personal preference, but I like to use roving that is similar to the colors of the fleece I'm using. That makes it less obvious if you end up with skimpy areas, since where the roving shows through, it blends with the fleece colors. You can use a dyed roving or one in a contrasting color, if that's your preference.

**Supplies: A tub (or large container of some kind)**

I use a big plastic tub for rinsing the fleece after it has been felted. You can use a washtub, large cooler, small kiddie pool, large sink, etc.



And now, FELTING BEGINS!!!!

Well, not yet. First we have to lay it all out. This part takes a while.

Laying out the Fleece

The next step is to lay out the fleece. Slip it out of the bag, carefully. You want it to remain as intact as possible in order to save yourself some work.



The fleece, slipped out of the bag

The fleece unveiled! I could tell in the bag that this fleece would be a good candidate. The locks are long enough to not disappear into the backing, somewhat distinct and with nice big crimp.

First, I carefully unroll the fleece onto my skirting table for a more thorough review. My skirting table is some scrap 2x4s with hardware cloth stapled to them. It doesn't have legs, it's just a top, which means it is easier to store, and I can just lay it out on a handy table. You can, of course have already skirted the fleece.



When I'm looking at the fleece at this point, I am looking for tiny ground-in VM (that WON'T come out during the felting). If I find it, back it goes in the bag for another use. Big pieces of hay, grass and burrs are okay, because you can easily pick them out before or after felting. Skirt it heavily to remove any poop, etc.

Looking good! I love the waves of these locks.

Closeup of the fleece—I can see that it is dirty, which is fine, since the dirt will wash out. No little bits of VM, which is good.

Closeups of the fleece





Cut Side of the Fleece

At this point, I am making sure that the tips are all down, cut side is up, and I am squishing it together to compact it. These were some escapee tips that I flipped back down. You want them on the pretty side of the fleece where you can show them off when you're done.



Fleece tips sticking up where they don't belong



Fleece cut side up, checked and compacted best I can.

To compact it, I start in the middle, and carefully scotch the fleece in (yes, scotch), trying to squish in any gaps while making sure the tips are down. Gaps at this point mean fleece gaps in your rug, where the roving will be all-too-obvious.

Adding the Backing



Starting to prep the back. First I pull off a hunk of roving and fluff it out a bit. You don't want it to be compacted at all, because you want it to felt to the cut ends of the fleece as well as itself.

Laying out the roving shingles.



You want to lay out the roving like you would shingles, with the ends and sides overlapping their neighbors. To do this I grasp one end of the roving, and pull off a hunk at a time (this will probably be about 2 staple lengths, give or take). Notice the uneven ends—that is what you want, since it makes the felting easier. (Notice my fine manicure—HA! I'm a metalsmith as well, and as a result my fingernails are stained dirty more often than not.)

You will end up with 2 layers of roving—this helps to make sure you don't have any bare or too-thin spots. We'll lay out one layer and then the second layer crosswise to the first.

The big piece is what I was pulling it from. You can see the first layer started on the right.



About halfway through the first layer. Notice how it is overlapping both the previous row and the previous piece. You want it to be like the way shingles on a roof overlap, and avoid any bare spots. If you are working outside, and the wind kicks up, you can spray the roving lightly with water to help keep it in place. I usually pat it down a bit as I go.

Take your time and don't rush. This is the most boring part, but very important. (Isn't that often the case with the boring parts?)

Layer one done!



Make sure you don't skimp on the edges. You will probably end up with a bit of extra roving there after it is felted, but you can trim that off later.

Closeup of the roving shingles.

Notice how the cut end of the fleece has disappeared? That's what we're looking for. Now on to the 2nd layer!



(mumble, mumble, mumble I didn't get any pictures of the layout of of the second layer mumble, mumble)

Second Layer Done!

The second layer is done as a right angle to the first layer. So, if you put the first layer horizontally, put the second layer at a right angle to that, or vertically. You shouldn't be able to see the fleece at all at this point.

NOW we are going to start felting. Really. (As with painting, the prep can take the longest)

Add the net back

Gently lay the curtain sheer/net over the roving. This net is wet, but that's only because I had left it where I was shaking out a fleece and it was filthy and I had to wash it before I could use it. Don't be like me. The net is the most helpful tool I have found in this journey. It allows you to rub the roving without the roving rolling up or moving around from the friction Yay, net! And, bonus, it is CHEAP and REUSABLE.

Add the Soap



Adding the soap—I squirt on a liberal amount of the dish soap. Remember, you're washing the fleece as you felt it.

Soaped and Wetted



Here the fleece has been wetted and soaped—the blueish stripes are the soap. You don't want to soak the fleece yet, just wet the top down so you can start felting. I use my hose with a sprayer on the end, but you can use a garden pump sprayer, hand sprayer, etc. I tucked the edges of the curtain under the edges of the fleece slightly to help contain it. I usually pull it away after it starts to felt. I have tried using other things to corral the fleece and help keep it's shape—a wooden frame, pool noodles—but while they work for other people, for me, they just got in the way. The best method for me is to make sure that the fleece is squished in as tightly together as possible before I start.

I didn't get a picture of me wetting it down because I couldn't figure out how to hold the hose with one hand and my phone with the other and take a picture. Coordination isn't my strong suit, you know.

Felting begins!

Gentle rubbing, like petting a skittish cat

Starting the rub. I start out lightly rubbing the wet, soapy net with both hands, gently at first. You want to agitate the roving and the cut ends of the fleece to start the felting process, and you don't want to rush it. If you rush it, you might have the backing felt to itself before it felts to the fleece, and that defeats the purpose! Patience, grasshopper.



Making progress!

Oooh, soap is starting to build up! Also, the fibers are migrating slightly through the net—see how it looks like it is growing chest hair? Time to lift it up check my progress.

*Checking the progress*

Gently, gently peel back the curtain. If you pull it off too quickly, you might pull up any roving stuck to it. Think about it like peeling a bandaid off a hairy arm—don't rip out the hair! Look at that roving starting to felt! We're on our way! What you are looking for is that the roving is starting to look smoother and cohesive.



Rubbing more with the net on

Lay the net back down and rub some more. I rub this side for about 10 minutes, gradually rubbing harder and harder, and then start using my fingers to massage it a bit, to join the cut ends a bit more to the roving. This is hard work for your hands. Add more hot water and soap as needed. Again, take it slowly—you can't rush this part.'

Flattened Fleece!



Time for more water—you can see it is flattening out. This is good, means it is starting to felt. Add hot water with your sprayer thingie to soak the fleece a bit more.

Thanks for hanging in this far if you are reading this EXTREMELY LONG tutorial! We're about halfway through the tutorial. Refill your teacup and read on. . .

Good thing I buy Dawn in the BIG bottles, isn't it?

Don't worry about adding too much soap. You are washing the fleece as you are felting it, and you won't overscour it.

Switch!

Time to look at the other side. The back should be cohesive enough at this point to hold together, but you don't want to stress it by grabbing one end and pulling—that can cause it to pull apart. I use an accordion or fan fold to fold up the fleece and make it easy to move and unfold on the other side. Think about how you used to make a paper fan as a child—that's what you are doing.



Folded Fleece



Fleece is folded up and ready to move to the other end of the table. Gently, carefully, drag it to the other end of the table. Take your time—your fleece is still in a somewhat delicate state and you don't want to stress the felted connections you have made so far. See all that dirty water pooling on the tarp? I told you we were washing the fleece as we went!

Locks Side

pay no attention to the junk in the background. . . .

Unfold the fleece by (again) carefully grabbing one end and gently pulling it to unfold it, fold by fold. Straighten out the edges and any parts that are tucked under. Look at those awesome locks! Time to work on this side a bit. You can see the excess roving/backing. Don't worry about it—we will deal with that later. Also, remember to hydrate yourself while you hydrate the fleece, especially if you are doing this outside in the South in the summer.

Looky



Woohoo! I just had to admire it some more. Also, my hands were tired. Feel free to take a break at this point if you need to. I did.



Wet. soapy locks

At this stage, the locks are *somewhat* adhered to the roving, but now we are going to work from the top side to get them felted in better.



It looks so peaceful under the curtain, doesn't it?

Back on with the net, so we can work on the locks side. Have I mentioned how much I love the net?



Soap

More soap. Soap, soap, soap.



Wet it down

More water. Hey! I figured out how to hold the phone and the hose and take a picture all at the same time!

Felting the Lock Side

I didn't get a picture of this, but imagine rubbing the lock side of the fleece thoroughly with your hands.

Next, I take the net off and massage the locks with my fingers, trying to get to the root of the lock. Work your way all over the fleece. I usually will do this once with the net on and once with the net off. Think about giving your favorite dog a good scritch, and you'll have the motion down. More hand-tiring work.



Time to Switch Sides

Accordian fold it back up so we can work on the back side. Gently. (And look at that dirty water!)

Squish

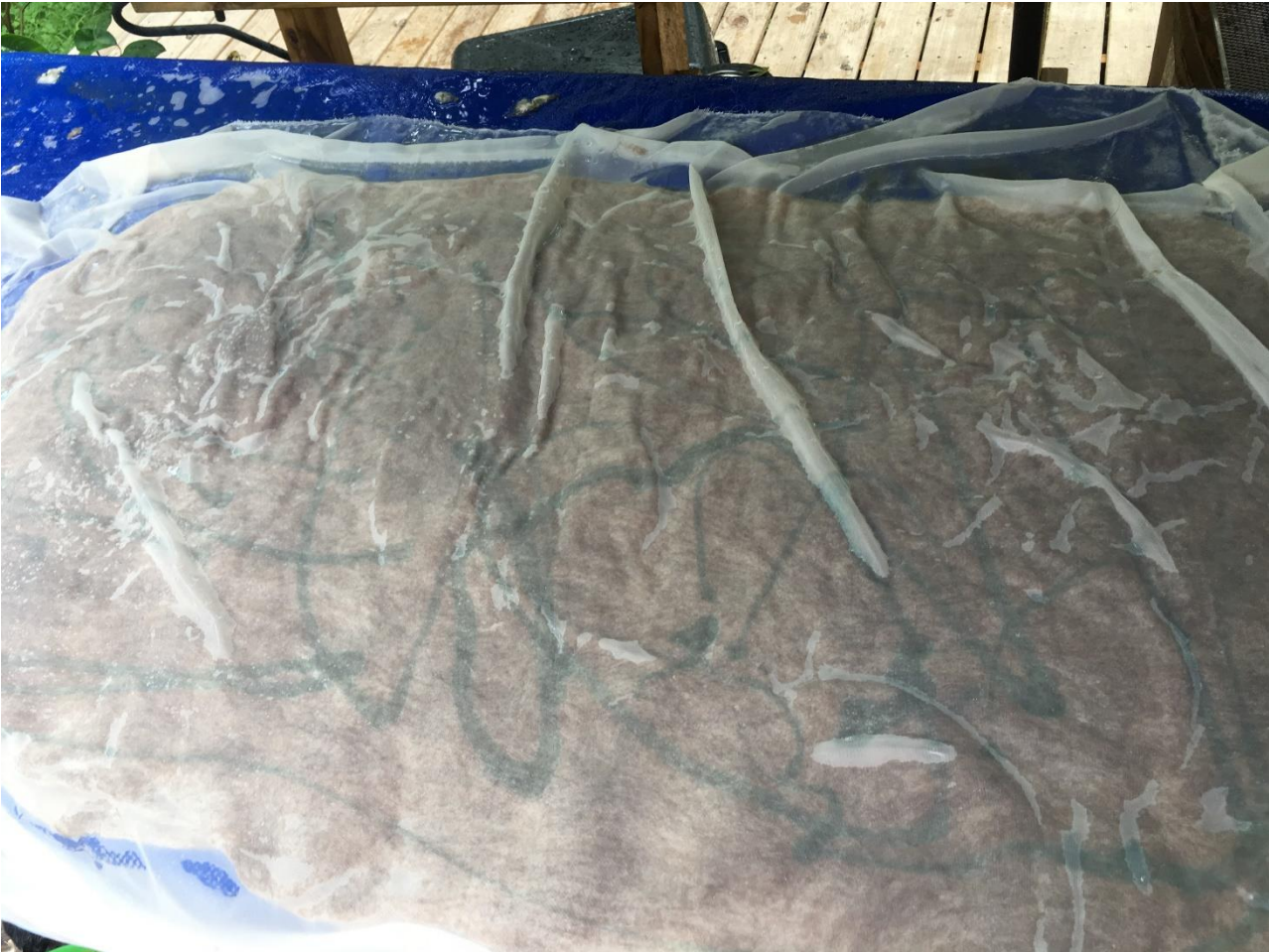
Take the opportunity to squish out some of the soapy water and think about how you're washing that fleece.

Squishy, squishy, squish



Rub-a-dub-dub

Fleece unfolded, roving side up, net back on and more soap and water applied. Back to rubbing! And more rubbing! About 5-10 minutes worth. You can be more vigorous about it this time.



Check your work

Take the net off. Look at that felted back! Amazing how much all that wool squished down, isn't it? We're doing great! It's time to give yourself a pep talk, because this has been a lot of work so far, and you are making progress, even though it is hard to see. Also, I needed to rest my hands again.

Fold it up

Fold that puppy up again, fan-style, and then fold it over and SQUISH. Time to rinse!



Rinsing



I plop it onto the deck and then. . .



Stompy stompy stomp stomp to get out more dirty water. Yes, I'm barefoot.



Bath Time!

Now, into a tub of hot/warm water to soak. Repeat until the water is clear. When you lift out the rug, don't grab one end and pull, try to scoop it all up. It's felted, but a wet rug is heavy and you don't want to stress the feltedness of it and tear it apart after all that hard work.

Lookin' Good!



The clean fleece spread out on the deck to admire for a minute. Starting to look like a rug, isn't it? Next, I roll it up and stomp on it some more to get out as much water as possible. Unroll, repeat. If you have a washer with a spin cycle that doesn't use water, you can put it in there to spin out the water.



Drying

Rug drying. This will take awhile. Time to go inside and hydrate. There will be more work to do tomorrow after the rug is dry, but until then. . .

This felter is finished.

Meanwhile, after a good night's sleep and a handful of ibuprofen. . .



Day 2

After the rug is dry. Moved the rug to a place in the sun—the hood of the truck. Also puts it at a good height for inspection. Here I am looking for tips that got felted in, any locks that didn't felt to the backing, any holes in the felted back, and if it needs to be rewashed.

Inspection

Here is an example of some lock tips that have felted in. You can gently tease them out by grabbing the tips and pulling them up.

**Almost dry**

The tips are a little crunchy—I may need to rewash, or at least re-rinse.

Oops!

There's a hole. This one is near the edge. I may end up trimming it off or sewing it up.

**Backside**

Another hole! This one is more towards the middle.

I will end up sewing this one up, using a color-coordinating yarn and a yarn needle. The suture won't show from the top.



Yay



The felting looks good here—a cohesive whole, and you can't really tell the direction of the fibers.

A little more work



Not as well-felted here. I can either go back and wet-felt it some more when I rewash it, or needlefelt the area down. The downside of needle-felting it from the back is that you can felt down the locks on the front when doing it.

Better!



rewashed it. Crunchy tips are gone, and it is fluffier overall. The finer locks along the top of the back have lost their lock definition and are fluffing out more than the rest, but that is fine.

Compare



Side-by-side before rewashing (on the left) and after (on the right).. Once it dries (AGAIN) I will inspect for more holes, etc., fix any issues, trim it up and start picking out any VM.

It's a Rug!



It's finally dry! Now onto the finishing—trimming, correcting any holes and fixing any loose locks. See though straggly parts hanging out? I want to trim those off to even it up, and get rid of the parts that are just the felted roving. Totally optional, but I like how it neatens it up.

Fixing

This is my handy-dandy hi-faluting felting board. Okay, it's an inexpensive foam swim board, but it's perfect as a lap board for needle felting, since it covers a large area and makes it much easier and faster to felt large surfaces. You can also use a piece of upholstery foam, but whatever you do protect your legs. Words of experience there.



Trimming



I trimmed it! I use small sewing scissors to cut away from UNDER the locks—this allows the locks to still hang over the edge giving it a natural look. Sorry I didn't get a picture—I think I was wearing down by this point. I save the trimmings, they can be used as stuffing OR be needle-felted into blank spots.

Close Look

Inspection time—missing locks here—I will need to add some.



Needle Felting

Here I am using a small, multi-needle needle felter to add some locks in—I'm using ones that I trimmed off. Sorry for the blurry picture, I was reallllly tired at this point. You could also use locks (washed) saved from the fleece. You could also just leave the bald spots. Some people think bald is beautiful, you know.



My larger needle felter—covers a larger area. Adding in some more locks to a bare area.



Backside



This time, I'm trying something different on the holes/thin spots on the back. Usually I sew up any holes using yarn and a yarn needle, but this time, I'm using the felted parts of the roving that I cut off. First, I (should) fluff out the edges a bit so they will blend, then I put them over the holes and needle felt it down. Afterwards, I fluffed up the lock side to release any locks that got accidentally needle-felted down.

FLUFFY!



Oooh! Look how fluffy it is!

Look who also likes it—she wants to claim all of my felted fleeces:



Thanks for making it this far! You deserve a prize for perseverance!

Or a nap.

I'm voting for a nap.