

SPINNING ON A DROP SPINDLE

The handspindle is a simple machine, it has no moving parts, with the exception of a few spindles which are made to break down for storage. It has a whorl, a round weight that allows the spindle to maintain a spin, and a shaft which goes through the center of the whorl. Some of the spindles are meant to be used while suspended, thus the name 'drop spindle', some are meant to be used while being supported on the leg, in a bowl, or on the ground, and some were held in one hand. Historically, handspindles, or drop spindles, were made of different materials depending on what was available around those who used them.



Top Whorl Spindles
in 3 sizes

Handspindles are versatile pieces of equipment, the same one that spins a good woollen thread can also spin cotton. By choosing your first spindle with care, it will be possible to use it over and over with different fibers. Like any other machine it is possible to buy one that only has one 'best' use. The weight of the spindle will affect the size of the yarn that you can produce. If the spindle is heavy, then your yarn must be thicker and strong enough to support the weight of the spindle and the weight of the yarn as you store it on the shaft. If the spindle is too light it will not spin well with the heavier yarns. The best weight is between 1½ ounces and 3 ounces. I use a smaller type that is great for the superfine thread, that is made of wood, and weighs just 1 ounce.

The whorl can be any shape, some are clay balls, some are flat circles; where they are placed on the shaft can change the efficiency of the spindle. The shaft needs to be long enough to allow the yarn to be wound around it and balance the size of the whorl. I have found that if the whorl's diameter is about one-fourth the length of the shaft, the spindle works well. Spindles with too long a shaft tend to wobble, and if the shaft is too short it will not spin as long. The spindles with balls instead of a flat whorl were normally used as supported spindles, but if made with a shorter shaft may spin enough to be used



Starting with a leader

suspended. As the whorl gets smaller, the shaft diameter will need to be smaller also, so that the weight remains in the whorl, not the shaft.

There are several types of handspindles so there are just as many ways to get started. If you have a low whorl spindle with a notch, you can tie a leader onto the bottom of the shaft, wind it up the shaft, and connect to the notch with a half-hitch. You can create your own leader by hand twisting some of the fibers you will be spinning. Roll them on your thigh to tighten the twist, fold the thread in half, fold back the loop end on the doubled thread, opening the loop. Pick up the doubled thread under the loop and pass the spindle tip through this slip-loop and pull tight. If you are using a high whorl

spindle simply catch a bit of the fiber in the metal hook and twist in a clockwise direction to begin the spinning. You are ready to start spinning.

Decide whether you want to hold the unspun fiber in your right or left hand, and spin the spindle with the opposite hand.



Catch the loose fiber on a hook

See which is more comfortable for you. Hold the end of the thread (and the unspun fiber should drape over the top of your hand and be held away from the spinning thread so it will not tangle). Suspend the drop spindle free putting tension on the thread. You will be able to spin a fairly fine thread with practice, but it must be strong enough to support the weight of the spindle. Reach with your free hand and hold the bottom of the spindle, give it a clockwise turn to start it spinning.



Drafting: pull up with fiber hand

See which is more comfortable for you. Hold the end of the thread (and the unspun fiber should drape over the top of your hand and be held away from the spinning thread so it will not tangle). Suspend the drop spindle free putting tension on the thread. You will be able to spin a fairly fine thread with practice, but it must be strong enough to support the weight of the spindle. Reach with your free hand and hold the bottom of the spindle, give it a clockwise turn to start it spinning.

For beginners: After you give the spindle a good strong twist, and it has spun for several seconds, stop it and place it between your knees to keep it from going in the opposite direction. Still holding tension on the thread use both hands to pull out the unspun fibers and watch the twist move up to form thread. In the drafting, always pull your top hand up to maintain the tension on the newly spun thread. When the twisting stops moving up the thread, pinch it off and give the spindle another good twist. Repeat this until you are within about 1½ inches from the end of your prepared fiber.

When you are more experienced: When you can spin a uniform thread using the method above, feel free to try the traditional drop spinning with the spindle suspended while turning. Give the spindle a good firm turn and use both hands to draft out the fibers so that the twist moves up the fibers forming thread. When the spindle is suspended, you will note that it is possible to draft by pulling the thread down instead of pulling the fiber up; it is still a good idea to pull the fiber up; it is a motion that will come once you start on the wheel. To keep the drafting triangle at eye level, lower your arms as you draft and wind the yarn when the spindle reaches the ground.

When you are ready to join on another piece of roving, allow the unspun fibers from the thread to lie on top of the



Catching the fiber on a leader



Getting started: twisting to begin the thread

new roving and draw out the two sections together for a smooth join. Once the drop spindle reaches the floor or you cannot keep it spinning, hold the thread under tension and take the spindle in your free hand. Unhook the thread from the notch or hook, and wind, clockwise, onto the shaft of the spindle evenly from the end closest to the whorl out. You will form a cone shape in your windings. You then hook the thread back on the notch or hook, leaving several inches of thread above the notch and continue spinning.



Winding the yarn around the shaft

PLYING ON A DROP SPINDLE



Plying: getting started

The decision to ply or not to ply is becoming less distinct. Singles are now being used in all mediums - weaving, crochet, knitting. Spinners are using both singles and plied yarns dependent on the yarn's own merits and not because someone else has said it should be so.

Plying is the twisting of two or more singles together to make one yarn. A slightly overtwisted yarn can be plied to correct the overtwist and create a balanced thread. When you hold a balanced yarn, it hangs loosely without twisting back on itself. Plying is also done to make a thicker yarn, often from a fiber that could not spin thick singles as well. Plying two different colors, fibers, or sizes of yarn can create completely new yarns from ordinary singles.

After you have spun at least two spindles of yarn, you can ply them. You simply make two balls of yarn from each spindle, put each ball in its own mason jar, box, or basket, and you are ready to ply. Placing the yarn in something keeps them from rolling around on the floor and getting tangled with each other. You can use a ball winder which will allow you to pull the center tail and the outer tail to ply from both ends of a single ball of yarn.



Remove year; wrap around shaft and put back on the hook

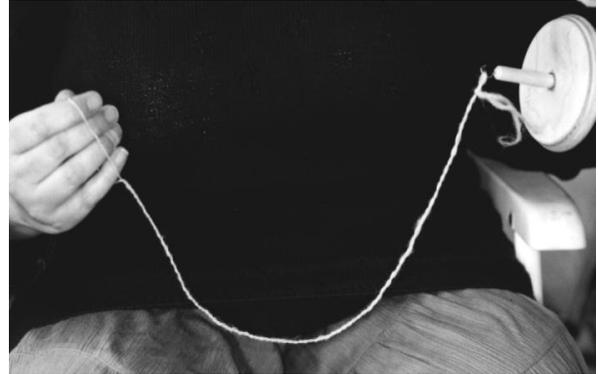
If you are using the high whorl spindle, you can slide the yarn off the end, and

put it on a knitting needle. Using a shoe box with holes in the sides, you can put the knitting needles in the holes and let them turn freely to unwind the yarn. The needles should turn freely in the holes.

Tie the 2 free ends of yarn together and loop onto the hook or notch of the spindle (or tie to a leader). Let the yarns feed through any two of your fingers on one hand to hold constant tension on the threads. You will be holding both threads together with the forefinger and thumb of the same hand.

Slide your fingers along the yarns for about ½ yard while inducing them to unwind from the storage set up. Spin the spindle counterclockwise (opposite from the direction you spun the singles) until the yarn seems nicely twisted.

If the yarn is newly spun, you can pick up the spindle in the other hand (do not release the hand that is holding the separate ends) and see if the plied yarn will form a nice curve from the spindle to your hand. That is a characteristic of a balanced yarn. You can use a purely visual check to make the yarn the way you want it, and give the spindle a another spin until the plied yarn looks the way you want.



Checking for balance

Wind onto the spindle in the opposite direction from the way you spun the singles to store the yarn. Half-hitch, or hook as before and repeat the above sequence plying about a yard at a time until all the yarn is plied.

SKEINING THE YARN



Making a skein and a ball of yarn

When you are ready to remove the yarn from the spindle, you can wind it into a ball or wind the yarn on a niddy noddy to form an open loop of yarn called a skein. If you do not have a niddy noddy, you can wrap the yarn around the back of a chair, around the form of a coat hanger, or simply around someone's two hands held up for the purpose.

There are other ways to store the thread, but the skeined yarn can be easily washed and stored until ready to use. Winding the yarn into a ball is another easy storage method and if the yarn is ready to use, you may want to simply wind the yarn into a ball.

It is possible to use your yarn directly off the spindle whether as singles or plied. Usually the yarn is washed before using to make sure all the grease and dirt is out of the yarn. It is also exciting to watch the way the yarn transforms by being washed. Wash in hot sudsy water, squeeze out excess water after rinsing, and hang or lay to dry.