What are you people doing – and why?

Spinning has been done for thousands of years to turn fibers into strong thread.

Imagine if every piece of cloth that you see, from baby diapers to ship’s sails to your own jeans started as fiber spun by hand on a small twirling object called a spindle. A few hundred years ago, that was the reality. All women, from peasants to noblewomen, were expected to spin wool and linen thread by hand every day just so that people could have clothes to wear, ships could have sails, and fishermen could have nets.

The spinning wheel, invented around the 13th century, sped up production. The earliest type, the Great Wheel, was turned by hand. A drive band from the wheel turned a small spindle, which was used to spin thread. About two hundred years later, the spindle was replaced by a flyer-and-bobbin arrangement to put twist in the fiber, and the wheel was turned by foot treadles. Only in the late 18th century did mills replace hand spinning as the primary source of spun thread and yarn.

Why do people spin today?

While some spinners today sell handspun yarn, most hand spinners practice their art for their own pleasure. By spinning their own yarn, hand spinners can make custom yarns for specific knitting, crochet, or weaving projects. Hand spinning is sometimes the only way to have yarns from rare breeds of animals that the large fiber mills aren’t interested in, such as Jacob sheep or pygora goats. In addition, hand spinners may buy their fiber from local farmers, where they can see the animals and know for certain if the animals are healthy, well treated, and if the farmer uses sustainable farming methods.

Can I learn to spin?

Sure you can! For very little money, you can start spinning with a drop spindle and some wool roving. A spinning wheel will cost a good deal more, but will last a lifetime. Here are some resources to help you:

- Woodland Woolworks, 262 S. Maple St. Yamhill, OR, sells spinning wheels, spindles, and a huge variety of spinning fibers and tools. They also offer spinning classes.
- Rose and Ram Knit Shop, 266 S. Main St., Independence, carries spindles and roving.
- Tangled Purls, on the corner of Commercial and Hoyt in Salem, carries roving for spinning.
- The Saturday Spinners meet at Mission Mill in Salem on the second floor of the main mill building on the first Saturday of each month, 10:00-3:00.
- The Salem Area Ravelers meet at the Ike Box on Saturdays from 1:00 until 5:00 and Wednesdays from 6:30 until closing. Primarily a knitting and crochet group, several members also spin.

Spinning Trivia

In Disney’s Sleeping Beauty, that tall pointed object that Aurora pricks her finger on is not a spindle. It’s a distaff, which was used to hold flax fiber for spinning into linen.