

WELCOME TO THE

Where It's All About The Wool And The Animals That Provide It

By Suzann Thompson

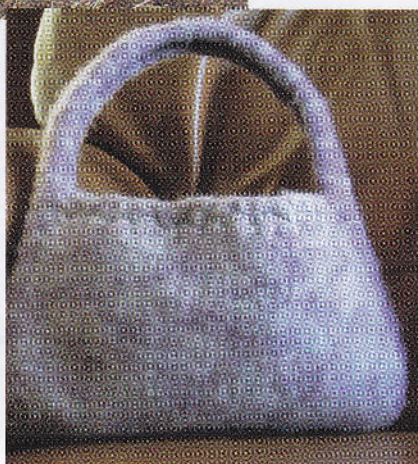
"I want people to like wool," says Suzanne Correira, owner of Fire Ant Ranch in Elgin, Texas. Then she adds, "I want people to like American wool." She speaks with enthusiasm and conviction borne of first-hand experience, leaving no question as to why she is so successful as a sheep and goat farmer, and fiber retailer.



At Right: T-Man and Mr. J, two of Suzanne's rams, live apart from the ewes and lambs for most of the year

A bag knitted and felted from Fire Ant Ranch's Softspun Single, a handspun and hand-dyed yarn (bag by Suzann)

Suzanne's one-woman operation offers fleece and yarn from happy sheep and goats. Spinning supplies and equipment round out her farm store inventory. She also produces a limited line of finished goods made from the wool of her own animals. Suzanne is involved in each phase of wool production, from shearing the sheep to hand-dyeing, to spinning, and all the way to the finished products.



Fire Ant Ranch had its beginnings in the mid-1980s, when Suzanne's sister taught her how to knit. Upon moving to Austin, Texas in 1985, Suzanne joined the Knitter's and Crocheter's Guild of Texas now known as the Austin Knitters and Crocheters Guild. "I joined to meet people and to knit," she said. She demonstrated knitting with the Guild at several fairs and festivals around Central Texas, and then, it just mushroomed from there.

After a Hill Country Arts Foundation workshop with Priscilla Gibson-Roberts, Suzanne was captivated by spinning and sock-knitting. Gibson-Roberts motivated her to look into the fiber business. "All this is her fault," said Suzanne, indicating the flock, farm store, and well-kept acreage of Fire Ant Ranch.

The ranch hasn't always looked so good. Suzanne's husband, Alfred, a software developer, surprised her in the early 1990s, when he said he wanted to move to the country. She was all for it. They bought around 15 acres with a house near Elgin. The place was an overgrown mess. The house was in bad shape.

The Correiras got to work. Over the next dozen years, they transformed the land, hauling off countless loads of junk, and making room for the native trees to thrive. Now the house is a yarn-lover's haven, with sheep breed-print tea towels tacked up in the kitchen.



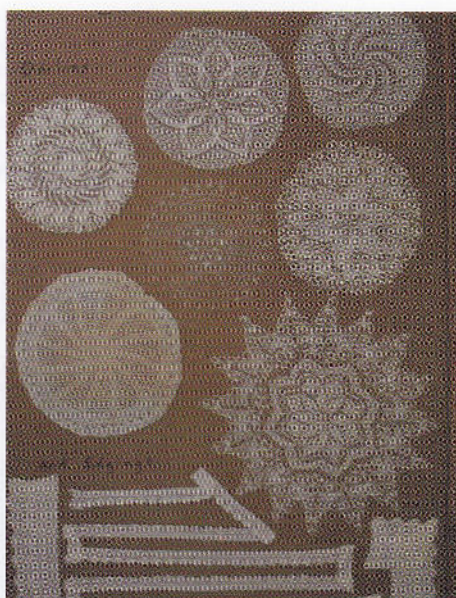
The yarn store cat enjoys her private domain, away from the other cats that live in the house.

This view of the farm shop at Fire Ant Ranch shows several ribbons Suzanne's booth has won.



hand-dyed hanks drying on the enclosed porch, and a bright knitting room with displays of old knitted and crocheted laces.

Suzanne's farm store and Alfred's library share a two-room detached building near the house. Further on, two horses and a mulc occupy the stables. Indian Runner ducks run in a pen outside, next to an enclosure that houses a pair of bottle-fed Shetland lambs. Rams and an old angora billy goat live near the house, too. Downhill, the ewes, lambs, and a few nanny goats have their stables and pasture.



Suzanne took this doily display to many Guild knitting demonstrations through the years.



Farm guests feed twin Shetland lambs, whose mother couldn't nurse them as Suzanne Correia attentively watches.

Naturally-colored angora goats and Shetland sheep comprised Suzanne's original flock. Since then, she has added Black Welsh Mountain sheep, which produce the deep, dark brown fleece, which is said to be black. More recently, Gulf Coast Native sheep have been added to her flock. "I tell people it doesn't have to be merino," she said.

The Black Welsh Mountain flock at Fire Ant Ranch is the first of its kind in Texas. The Black Welsh Mountain is now considered a recovering breed, as opposed to a rare breed, with about 800 head in the United States. Its wool has a short staple and tends to shed slightly as you knit. "You have to give it a chance," Suzanne said, "because the wool stands up well in lace knitting, and felts wonderfully." She is active in the American Black Welsh Mountain Sheep Association, which held its first general meeting in 2004, as a result of her constant encouragement, or in her words, "unmerciful pestering," of the membership.

Fire-Ant Ranch's commercially-spun Black Welsh Mountain wool knitted in an eyelet pattern.



The tassel below, made from Fire Ant Ranch Black Welsh Mountain wool, is a sample from a workshop to be taught at the Wool Festival at Taos.



Black Welsh Mountain wool is not glossy, so it seems to swallow light. Metallic or brighter color threads considerably brighten its deep darkness, as in the skirt of this tassel. The top of the tassel was originally crocheted in Black Welsh Mountain wool alone, but it contrasted too strongly with the skirt. One row of trim, with the wool and metallic held together, relieved the strong contrast. Large-hole copper beads pick up the color in the metallic thread.



A fluffy Shetland lamb and her mom, Caitlan, graze in one of the pastures at Fire Ant Ranch.

Shetland lambs change color as they mature. It certainly provides variety to a spinners fiber basket!



Gulf Coast Native sheep were brought to North America by Spanish explorers. They adapted to the hot and humid conditions, thriving mainly in Florida and Louisiana. Gulf Coast Natives are unusually resistant to certain internal parasites. The mostly-white breed is endangered. Suzanne describes her Gulf Coast Natives as "healthy, pretty, sturdy foundation stock. Their wool is as good as the best Shetland, though slightly shinier. It dyes beautifully."

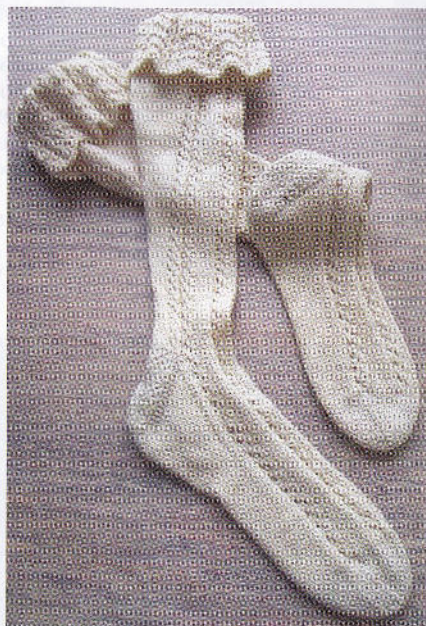


Eager ewes and lambs run out to graze after spending the night in their pen.

Suzanne is good at spotting trends and niche markets. Early in her fiber career, she went to Scottish clan gatherings with Alfred. Here were scores of men dressed in Scottish regalia. A proper kilt and its accessories represent a hefty investment, and the men looked great from the knees up.

Unfortunately, their socks ruined the fine effect. They wore "plain, horrible, probably women's knee socks," said Suzanne. "I hated seeing their socks fall down and the guys always having to jerk them up."

Using her knowledge of sock knitting, Suzanne specialized in knitting kilt hose. The secret to a knee sock that stays up, she discovered, is to fit it to the calf of the person who will wear it. Exact measurements are critical, and Suzanne asks for the wearer's height and shoe size to help with fitting.



Since the socks must fit comfortably into shoes, Suzanne knits 10 to 15 percent fewer stitches than the gauge indicates. "The fun part and the hard part," she said, "is to fit the stitch pattern into the shaping." To finish the sock, knit a very tight rib at the top or under the cuff. Never, never put elastic in the garter band. These days, Suzanne occasionally knits kilt hose to order, but her primary concern is marketing products from the ranch. In 1994, she and a friend submitted slides to the Wool Festival at Taos, and were pleased to be juried in as sellers. "I made it in with beautiful Texas mohair," she said. That first year, Suzanne sold mohair and Shetland wool from her own animals, knitting patterns, and finished shawls and hats.

Suzanne's kilt hose, shown above, are custom shaped to the wearer's leg. The foldover cuff cleverly hides a firm band of ribbing for keeping these long stockings up.

As Suzanne established herself on the show circuit, she found what sold best, by far, was color. Customers liked all kinds of color combinations. Her business focused on naturally-colored and hand-dyed fibers for hand-spinners and knitters. "I'm a knitter, so I mostly do knitting wools," she said, "contrasting them with weaving yarns, which are too tightly spun for the taste of most knitters."

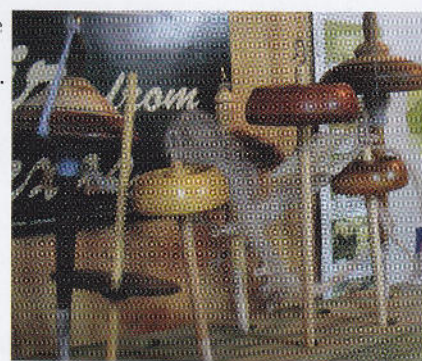
For knitters, Suzanne hand-spins and hand-dyes fleece from her flock. Her space-dyed yarn and fancy yarns sell well. Sometimes she sends the wool to be spun commercially. Suzanne is pleased to be an Opal sock yarn dealer. Opal is the only yarn she carries that is not produced from her ranch.

Suzanne has worn out two knitting machines. This Brother machine has withstood very heavy use—so far.



Spinners can buy a range of products, from unwashed fleece to hand-dyed, carded batts and bags of hand-picked combinations of mohair and wool, which Suzanne calls "Fire Ant Mounds." She also stocks hand spindles, carders, and spinning wheels.

Suzanne doesn't forget those non-knitters and non-spinners who visit wool festivals. The rolled brim hats she made one year on a Brother flat bed bulky were popular. "Teenagers jumped on them," she said, "because they were fun and cute and reasonably priced." This year, she is knitting mittens by hand, enjoying the chance to play with color.



Knitted, felted bags sold well, until people started making their own in droves. Either way is good for Suzanne, because bag knitters love her felting-friendly yarns. Easily felted wool can have its drawbacks, though. A batch of Suzanne's roving

Hand spindles at the farm shop.



Suzanne uses this cottage-industry carder by Patrick Green to prepare batts for spinners and felters.

accidentally felted in the dye-pot. (Roving is carded wool that has been drawn out into a long, loose rope, ready for spinning.) The result was a bulky but light strand of wool. The basket she knitted with the felted roving turned out so well, that now she says, "I hope I can reproduce it."

You can catch up with Suzanne at several festivals and shows every year, including the Wool Festival at Taos (New Mexico), the Estes Park Wool Market (Colorado), and the much-raved-about Wildflower Fiber Retreat in Tyler, Texas. "I found out

I am better at retail than I ever thought I was," she said. "It's a blast, but it's hard work." This year's Wool Festival at Taos is October 1 and 2, with workshops before and after the festival. Suzanne is Workshop Coordinator for the first time this year. (See side panel for more information.)

If you find yourself near Austin, Texas, with a few hours to spare, make an appointment to visit Fire Ant Ranch's farm store. Then you can meet the happy sheep whose fleece you plan to use.

The 2005 Wool Festival at Taos



Now in its 22nd year, the Taos Wool Festival is a mecca for knitters, says Suzanne Correia, coordinator of workshops for the festival. About two-thirds of the workshops this year are for knitters, and several mixed technique classes are scheduled. Workshops run September 25-30 and October 3-7, and the Festival is on the weekend of October 1 and 2.

Trim sample pictured here was made from Fire Ant Ranch's Black Welsh Mountain wool, for the "Alternative Tassels and Trims" workshop, offered at the Taos Wool Festival this year.

The purpose of the festival has always been to promote regional wool production. Vendors must follow strict guidelines, which require that at least 60 percent of each vendor's stock must be animal fiber from the United States. Foreign fiber is not allowed in the show. And yes, said Suzanne, "We actually have booth police."

This year's total of 67 booths makes for a manageable show. The smallness of the show recommends it, as shoppers will still have time to enjoy the mountains and the artistic atmosphere in Taos.

Visit www.taoswoolfestival.org/workshops.html to find out more about the Festival and workshops.

To contact The Fire Ant Ranch, write, call or e-mail them at:

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For basic information about Black Welsh Mountain wool, see Carol Rhoades's article "Fiber Basics: Black Welsh Mountain" in *Spin Off*, Spring 2005, pg. 66.