

eye on elegance

a study of 100% suri garments

Article and Photos By Patricia Bronson and Cheryl Crosswait



On our farm in Virginia, we not only raise suris, but also produce 100 percent suri alpaca garments from our animals' fiber. We hand pick and hand clean the fleeces. Some are then processed into yarn by specialty mills in the U.S, while others we hand comb and spin ourselves.

This article features garments made from the fleece of six suris: Mildred, First Class, Maggie, Luke, Elliot, and Cassidy. None of the fleece was mixed with fleece from other animals or with other fibers. The fleece used to make the handspun yarn was unblended to preserve the natural color variations of each animal and produce unique yarn. For example, Luke's apparently white fleece spins into yarn ranging in color from champagne to beige. Should some of Luke's fiber be dyed, the result would likely be lovely heather hues.

Suri yarn behaves unlike any other and requires unique knitting techniques, far different from those developed for acrylic and wool. This may be why so many experienced knitters believe suri is too difficult to knit, especially on a machine. Learning to knit with acrylic or wool yarn as a first step is inefficient and frustrating, since the learning curve restarts with suri fiber. Perseverance and practice exclusively with suri is the key to producing 100 percent suri garments.

All the garments discussed below are handmade with help from a knitting machine. Pure suri creates wonderfully soft, lightweight garments. The luster of the yarn lends itself to a gorgeous display in stockinet stitch, knit-purl combinations, tuck stitch, and lace patterns.

Suri fiber does not stretch like wool and lies more like silk or rayon. Hence, suri garments drape the body and allow for a simple but elegant look. However, because of the fiber's inelastic nature, ribbing made from lace-weight suri yarn will not look or function on cuffs and other edges like usual ribbing. Better finishes for suri garments include hemmed, crocheted, and tuck stitched edges.

Case Study #1: Mildred

Mildred's white fleece is soft and has well defined locks with no twist or curl. While locks without twist lose points in competition, they should earn 10 out of 10 for ease of cleaning. Straight locks remain remarkably free of vegetable debris. Once combed or carded, these locks are indistinguishable from their curly competitors.



Mildred's fleece grows in straight, easy-to-clean locks

"Pure suri creates wonderfully soft, lightweight, lustrous garments."



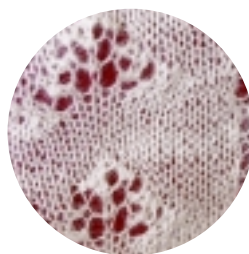
*Stockinet stitch with
crochet border*



*Knit-purl combination
in a geometric stair
step pattern*



*Tuck stitch pattern.
Are those alpacas
running?*



*Shafts-of-wheat
lace pattern*



*Picot hem with
geometric tuck
stitch border*



From Mildred's fleece: baby sweater with hood, raglan sleeves & matching booties; a receiving blanket with looped cord edging; and a shawl with three stockinet panels, joined and edged with crochet stitches

Taos Valley Wool Mill spun Mildred's fleece into two-ply, lace-weight yarn from a staple length ranging from 5 to 7 inches. Spun in lace-weight, Mildred's fleece makes lovely lightweight garments suitable for moderate climates. The fiber also makes beautiful baby items, shawls and lace scarves.

Case Study #2: First Class

First Class is a white suri male with uniform, tightly twisted locks. His locks were combed into rovings and hand spun with barely enough twist to keep the yarn together. The low twist in this yarn creates a relaxed, buttery texture. Although plying added some strength to this medium-weight yarn, a twist that held other suri yarns together frequently left this yarn with flyaway ends. Measuring slipperiness on a scale from one to ten, with sheep's wool ranging from one to four, huacaya from four to seven, and suri from seven to ten, First Class earns a nine.



Hand spun, V-neck tunic from First Class's yarn with tapered shoulders; a knit edge finishes the neckline

First Class' yarn, with its light twist, presented a knitting challenge because it regularly broke with no warning. This left numerous stray yarn ends that had to be worked into the

sides of the garment. The work was well worth the effort, since the resulting garment is soft and buttery, light but warm – perfect for autumn, winter, and spring in Virginia. Despite being made from fragile yarn, the garment itself is not frail. The tunic is frequently worn and washed, and has yet to show signs of wear.



From Maggie's fleece: close up of bay black scarf finished with a crochet scallop-seashell edge and mauve beads; spool of Maggie's yarn; lightweight, yet warm, suri products are known for their elegant drape

Case Study #3: Maggie

Maggie has superfine, twisted locks that vary in color from a deep dark rich brown to almost black. Her locks were combed into rovings and hand spun into a two-ply medium-weight yarn. Maggie's outstanding luster plays against her rich, dark colors to produce a unique fabric. When knit with extra large stockinet stitches, the fabric has a soft, open weave.

Case Study #4: Luke

Luke is a white suri male with large, well-defined, tightly twisted locks. His fleece is outstanding for its softness. Lightfoot Farms spun Luke's fleece into a medium-weight, two-ply yarn from a staple length of about nine inches. Interestingly, a baby sweater made from Luke's medium weight yarn using the same design as one made from Mildred's lace-weight yarn have very



From Luke's fleece: a baby sweater featuring a simple lace diamond pattern on front and back panels, a tuck-stitch finish on sleeves and bottom, and a bunny button at neckline for a bit of whimsy; a clutch handbag with open tuck-stitch braid edging

different appearances. Luke's yarn apparently has enough memory to show hand-made lace and tuck-stitch designs, while these are visible only under close inspection of Mildred's piece. (Ed. note: to show this difference, use photos 11 and 27.)

Case Study #5: Elliot

Elliot is a four-year-old white male with uniform locks that run all the way to his toes. Lightfoot Farms spun Elliot's fleece into a medium-weight, two-ply yarn.

"Pure suri fiber has little 'memory' and tends to drape the body for a simple, elegant look."

Case Study #6: Cassidy

Cassidy's white fleece inspired our first "soup to nuts" project. Her thin, well-defined locks with twist are highly reflective, transforming into lustrous white angel hair when opened. In May 2001, we took our brand new hand shears, marched into Cassidy's pasture, and sheared our first animal ever. During the rest of the year and well into the next, we picked, combed, then spun her fleece into a two-ply lace-weight yarn suitable for light, airy garments. Finally, we knitted Cassidy's fleece into a soft lace T-shirt, our favorite creation to date.

Our 'Spin' on Suri

While other breeders focus on progeny as the end product of their breedings, we consider our final product the alpaca apparel that will be created from our animals' fleece. This is so important to us that we've added a step to the interview process for stud service. Before we're convinced of a stud's value to us, we take a sample of his fleece, and comb and spin it to make sure it meets our standards for apparel. ❖



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From Elliot's fleece: a full-length V-neck tunic with tuck-stitch border, picot hem, and romantic sleeves which drape the hand; a T-shirt inspired, simple V-neck shorty-shirt with crochet seashell edge on the neck and sleeves. Front and back feature four rows of alpacas running in alternating directions; Elliot's medium-weight, two-ply yarn



From Cassidy's fleece: the combination of lace pattern and Cassidy's lustrous fiber in this author-created feminine T-shirt creates a faintly shimmering design; Cassidy's locks; Cassidy's lace-weight yarn

Patricia Bronson, Ph.D. and her husband, Robert, started Capital Alpacas in 1998 with the purchase of Mildred, a stately, white suri alpaca. Patricia learned to spin with Mildred's fleece. She now "interviews" suri studs by spinning lace weight yarn from their fleece. (703) 319-2239; patricia@capitalalpacas.com

Cheryl Crosswait, MED crafts garments from Patricia's suri yarns. She especially loves knitting lace patterns, creating heirloom garments and accessories.