

# Lifestyles

GREENE COUNTY RECORD

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## From sheep to shawl, Vonnegut does it all

*Sheep farmer/artist uses natural dyes to color her own wool*

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Whether shopping for your back-to-school fall fashions or sorting your laundry, everyone has a favorite color when it comes to clothing and other textiles. In fact, evidence from ancient Egyptian tombs suggests humans have been dyeing their clothes for more than 4,000 years. Historically, dyes were derived from sources found in nature such as vegetables, plants, berries, trees and insects. Synthetic dyes were invented during the Industrial Revolution and have risen in use since the 1850s, according to “The Evolution of Textile Dyes” on keycolor.net.

Although commercial clothing manufacturers go to great length to ensure their synthetic chemical dyes are safe for everyday use, natural dyes can be just as colorful—and are fun to create, as well. Local sheep herderess, weaver and artist Ann Vonnegut sells colorful creations at annual craft shows and fiber festivals—and she has invested decades into exploring every aspect of the wool medium. From raising and caring for her Leicester Longwool sheep to shearing, cleaning and combing the wool, spinning fiber into yarn and weaving tapestries, towels, rugs and more—and yes, she makes her own natural dyes, as well.

“I took a natural dye class some years ago through the Handweavers Guild of America,” Vonnegut said. “They have a conference every couple of years and this class was held in Albuquerque, NM in 2020.”

Vonnegut first became interested in owning her own sheep after working with the National Park Service at Oxen Hill Farm in Maryland, where she learned how to spin wool.

“I learned how to spin while I was there, and then the spinning went to dyeing, and then from dyeing I got into wanting to have a flock of sheep,” she said. “I wanted to raise a rare breed of sheep and so I did some research on the Leicester Longwool; there aren’t that many breeders that raise this particular kind of sheep. ... I thought it would be nice to get a place out in the country and have sheep and just one thing led to another.”

The Leicester Longwool was popular during the colonial period in America but was originally developed by agriculturist Robert Bakewell in Leicestershire, England, in the late 1700s. Bakewell’s aim was to create a breed that was a producer of both long, course wool and high-quality meat.

“It has long, lustrous wool for spinning and it’s great for dyeing,” Vonnegut said.

Compared to the Suffolk sheep, which is more common in the South with its white wool and black face and legs, the Leicester Longwool has very long,



PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

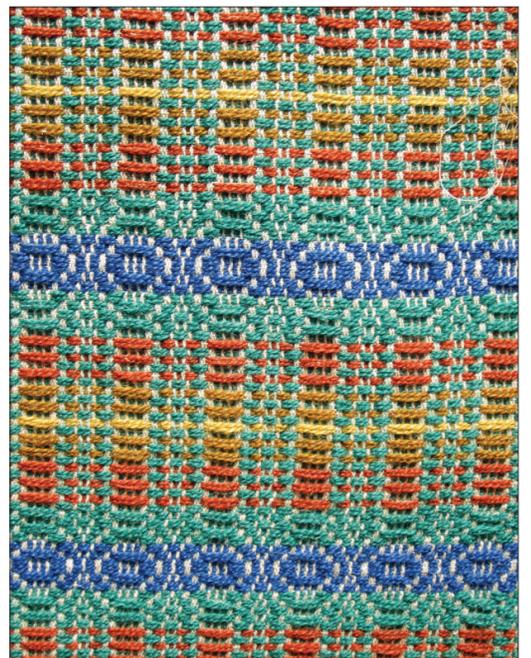
Above, Dyke sheep farmer Ann Vonnegut cooks locks of wool over a fire with alum and onion skins to produce a natural orange color. Below, a finished tapestry (this one used chemical dyes) made by Vonnegut on the loom in her home studio.

slow-growing dense wool that grows into curls. They are very docile, according to the Livestock Conservancy—which lists this particular breed as “threatened” and a priority for conservation. They were brought back from near extinction in the early 1900s and came to Virginia via Colonial Williamsburg, which is where Vonnegut first heard of them.

Once a year, the sheep shearer comes to call and relieves the small flock of sheep of their heavy wool. After cleaning the wool to remove debris and the oils (called lanolin) from the fiber, there are many different techniques to turn the raw wool into a finished product.

“With Leicester Longwool, the wool is a very long lock, unlike Merino, which has a shorter lock,” Vonnegut explained, pulling several locks of wool out of a bucket and sliding them onto a metal comb in her makeshift studio. “This is called combing, and there is such a thing as carding—two different processes for worsted or for woolen. A lot depends on how you process it with combs or with carding.”

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Above, finished yarn hang on a drying rack in the yard. The blue comes from indigo; orange is from onion skins; black from log-wood; reds from madder and cochineal. Left, the wool’s final color after cooking with onion skins for over an hour.



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### SPECIALS

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| <b>8/26:</b> Fettuccine Alfredo or Chicken Fettuccine Alfredo. Sides: Steamed Broccoli, Fried Zucchini & Squash  | Sides: Carrots, Hashbrown Potatoes  |
| <b>8/27:</b> Fish & Chips Platter with Fries served with Tartar Sauce & Coleslaw, PEW! PEW! Shrimp (Fried Butterfly Shrimp tossed in a house-made creamy, sweet & spicy sauce). Side: Beets, Macaroni & Cheese | <b>8/29:</b> Chili served with a Grilled Cheese Sandwich. Sides: Stewed Tomatoes, Scalloped Potatoes                |
| <b>8/28:</b> Philly Cheesesteaks topped with Provolone, Onions, Peppers, Lettuce, Tomato, & Mayonnaise.  | <b>8/30:</b> Salisbury Steak Dinner served with Green Beans & Mashed Potatoes. Sides: Mashed Potatoes & Green Beans |
|  | <b>9/1:</b> Pinto Beans served with Cornbread. Sides: Fried Potatoes, Broccoli Cheese Casserole                     |

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