



Mohair from heritage goats

It's a great idea to produce fibre from your own farm, whether from sheep, goat or rabbit. This has been a rather neglected aspect of self sufficiency, but it's less demanding than growing your own milk or meat. Of course the animals still need care, but fibre processing can be done any time – traditionally in the dark winter evenings.



By ANN CLIFF

Recently I visited Valerie Donald, a craftswoman who makes blankets, jumpers and teddy bears from mohair and wool in a truly 'cottage industry'. She spins, weaves, knits and felts and she also sells silky unprocessed mohair to home spinners.

With the help of the internet, small producers and people in remote areas now have a means of selling their fibre. Value – adding has a new meaning when you shear and then process home – grown fibre for a world market.

Five minutes from the Orbost town centre in East Gippsland, Valerie's little piece of paradise is home to a special breed of fibre goats the Croajingolong flock that she has bred since 1977. On her sixteen acres she also keeps donkeys, Dorper sheep, ducks and a very responsible alpaca who lives with the goats and sits in the group with them. Valerie recently had to spend two months in hospital and the alpaca kept the foxes away.

AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE ANGORA GOATS

Val's goats are a particular pure strain of Angora goats, with a traceable history. They are registered with the Rare Breeds Trust of Australia, a non-profit organisation that supports rare breeds of domestic livestock. There are only 100 Australian Heritage Angora goats left, and very few breeders. (You may remember a passing reference to them in an earlier article about why we should keep rare breeds.)

These goats are descended from the Banksia flock dating to 1904, whose owner Mr Barton was the only person to continue the pure breed in Australia, unmixed with the blood of feral or dairy goats. Turkey was the Angora's original home, but the pure breed was more or less extinct in Turkey before the end of the nineteenth century. Many commercial Angoras come from South Africa.

Valerie is trying to encourage new breeders to keep these heritage Angoras because she wants to see them and their important genes survive. Unfortunately, she has had to cut down the size of her flock. 'I've had to sell off my pregnant does,' she says, 'hopefully I can start breeding again in twelve months' time.' A shoulder replacement has meant that she can't use her hands and arms very much at present, but ever hopeful, she has reared some young females for breeding next season.

In the beginning Valerie had 'scruffy old goats' she says, but because her great interest is fibre she took them to an Angora buck with the idea of grading up gradually to fibre goats from feral does. It's quite possible to 'breed up' to fibre goats, with a little time and patience. But then she visited a few Angora studs and fell for a purebred doe which she bought for \$1800. This doe gave her beautiful animals and her purebred flock gradually evolved. The great advantage of pure breeds of course is that they 'breed true', that is they produce predictable offspring.

These days, Valerie doesn't want to encourage cross breeding of her Angoras.

Unless more dedicated breeders can be found, the heritage Angoras will disappear into a mix of other genes and the blood lines will be lost, along with the fine fibre.

Croajingolong goats have been carefully selected for fine fleeces and Valerie will cull anything too coarse. She says they're hardy, although in wet seasons they need to be kept out of mud. They need foot trimming and drenching more often than sheep, but as they are small animals this isn't too much of a wrestling match. They don't need crutching, or 'wiggling' – the quaint name used for giving a short back and sides to some animals with hair over their eyes.

Goats need plenty of minerals and Valerie has three mineral blocks in each paddock to supply sulphur, iodine and copper/cobalt. She says salt blocks made for sheep and cattle don't contain enough minerals for goats.



VALERIE DONALD IN HER WEAVING ROOM.



SHINY, SILKY MOHAIR IS OFTEN SOLD FOR DOLLS' HAIR.



BLANKET WOVEN BY VAL FROM MOHAIR AND WOOL. FOR SOME WORK SHE GETS HER FIBRE COMMERCIALY SPUN.

Apart from grazing and some browse they get a goat cereal mix which also has added minerals, combined with lucerne chaff which supplies the much needed fibre.

The goats are so appealing with their shining ringlets that it's not hard to fall for them. But she's been disappointed when new owners have found caring for the goats too difficult and animals have been lost to the



THIS GREEN BEAR'S FUR IS FELTED MOHAIR.

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DONKEYS LIVE HAPPILY WITH THE GOATS.

register – in other words, disappeared from the records, possibly crossed with other breeds.

Valerie has written a book about how to care for Angoras, in the hope that this will help people who have not kept goats before.

Angora goats are ready to breed at 18 months. The buck runs with them in March and they kid in September, often producing twins or triplets. Valerie shears them twice a year, in February and August, employing a professional shearer these days.

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There is a small commercial mohair industry in Australia, with one mohair broker and three major buyers. The fibre is classed and pressed into 200 kg bales for transport. Commercial Angoras are also shorn every six months and the usual length of staple for sale is 11

to 13 cm. As with any fibre producing animal, the great enemy is weed seeds in the coat.

Valerie produces comparatively small amounts of mohair and she says it is very suitable for hand spinning. She has always been interested in hand crafts and holds a diploma in textiles. Some of the lustrous ringlets are sold on the internet to doll makers for doll’s hair.

At times Valerie blends mohair with sheeps’ wool and finds an English Leicester – Merino cross the best. She sometimes dyes her fibre and sells skeins of wool for knitting and weaving, as well as free knitting patterns on her web site for 12 ply mohair.

For a ‘homespun’ effect in some garments Valerie spins wool with tufts of mohair added at intervals. She has a professional weaving room and used to have parties of visitors watching her work.

Felting is another possibility when you grow fibre. Valerie makes felt for teddy bears. This is an ancient craft process; nomads made tents of felt, the traditional yurt and I’ve seen it done by craft workers.



DORPER SHEDDING WOOL, NOT THE MOST ATTRACTIVE OF SIGHTS

Valerie starts with a layer of plastic, then a layer of bubble wrap, face down, followed by a piece of cotton muslin. The mohair has been carded (she uses a dog comb to straighten out the fibres) and an even layer of mohair goes on top of the muslin. She mixes up soap flakes and hot water in a jig and wets the fibre, patting it down and then rubbing in a circular motion until it's smooth.

The whole thing is rolled up carefully without creases and tied, then rolled in a towel. Roll the bundle 100 times, then unwind it, roll up from the other side and give it 100 more rolls. After this the mohair is unrolled, the soap is washed out and it is laid flat to dry. When you have made the teddy, the mohair can be brushed up.

DONKEY STUD

Val breeds donkeys – she has a jack and two jennies – and occasionally has one for sale. She says Jack, the male donkey, once chased off a German Shepherd dog that

was harassing her goats. Donkeys are clean animals and always leave their dung in the same place. She has a delightful little donkey cart in which to train young donkeys.

DORPER SHEEP

It's surprising Valerie keeps Dorper sheep because they are well known for shedding their fleece naturally. She is a newcomer to Dorsers, but she likes them because they look after themselves apart from the usual drenching and possibly hoof trimming. She started with eight well bred ewes from studs in 2010 and now she has nineteen, including 'Rambo' the ram.

With all these animals, plus the delightful ducks and the alpaca, Valerie passes very happy days. Angora goats are her favourite animal and she is hoping that the valuable genes of the Australian heritage goats will be preserved into the future. They are probably the purest of the breed in the world today.