



# Knitting with Handspun Alpaca Yarn

Chris Switzer

Knitting is the most popular of all the fiber arts. There are more knitters than spinners, crocheters, weavers, felters, and probably the whole bunch combined. We do knitting at different stages of our lives. I remember knitting a vest for my boyfriend as a teenager (now my husband!). Later, I made baby items for our two sons. Always small things for myself: such as hats, ear warmers, scarves, and mittens. Now, I am knitting for three grandchildren.

Alpaca yarn is wonderful for knitting projects! It is soft, warm, and lightweight. Vests are particularly nice – for women or men or kids. Sock projects are very popular these days, with a variety of new books and patterns. Lace knitting is more intermediate to advanced; starting with a scarf is a good way to learn. So enjoy the projects presented here. Pick up some alpaca yarn and start a new idea!

## Handspun, Handknit Lace Scarf

by Claire Walker

Claire writes, “I like to shear and process all of the fleece from my alpacas myself. That way, I can have total control over a project from beginning to end. I spun the yarn for this scarf from a brown and cream-colored pinto; I used fleece from the neck and blanket areas.”

She spun the singles using a 9:1 whorl on her spinning wheel and then made a balanced 2-ply yarn. Then she washed and blocked the yarn and it was very soft; it measured approximately 20 wraps per inch (around a ruler). Using size 4 straight wooden needles, she knitted the “Tilting Ladder Pattern” from Barbara Walker’s book, *A 2nd Treasury of Knitting Patterns*. The scarf measured 38 inches x 7 inches and weighed 2.3 ounces. It is just the right length to be worn under a short jacket.

*Claire has been knitting, crocheting and doing all types of needlework for 45 years. She learned to spin in 1991 and especially loves to do fine alpaca yarn for lace shawls. Her yarns have won numerous awards, including Reserve and Grand Champion at the Estes Park Wool Market. Five-time recipient of the “Silver Medallion” for best handspun yarn at the Taos Wool Festival, Claire has been raising alpacas and using their fiber since 1993. She lives in the Pagosa Springs, Colorado, area. Two of her favorite things to do are teaching spinning and writing a column, “Fiber Tips,” for Alpacas Magazine.*



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## Handspun, Handknit Grey Vest

by Ellen Pfister

Platinum grey alpaca roving, purchased from a yarn shop, was spun for the front and back of this vest. A pound of roving was used and then size 6 needles for the knitting.

The vest pattern (large size) is a lace sampler from Berroco (planned for a linen yarn). To be sure that there was enough of the light grey handspun yarn, the front and back were knitted all in one, from the bottom up. Then a darker grey (four ounces) was spun from one of her own alpacas for trim and to finish the shoulders. Ellen writes, "The 100% alpaca was a pleasure to spin and knit. I have found that black and dark colors are the most useful for designing garments."

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*Ellen is active in her local fiber guild and regional fiber events. She has three alpacas plus some llamas, and her husband raises cattle. Shepherd, Montana, is home, but Ellen travels to take classes at a variety of events.*



## Handspun, Handknit Brown Vest

by Marta Moore

"I love this old Classic Elite vest pattern, so when I finished my first batch of decent handspun alpaca from one of our alpacas, this was the pattern I grabbed" wrote Marta. The fiber was first washed in a mild soap, rinsed in a light vinegar rinse bath, then sun dried, and finally hand carded into rolags. Next the yarn was handspun into a 2-ply (12-14 wraps per inch) with a moderate loft and soft handle.

The pattern, done in the Trinity stitch with a 4-stitch cable insert, uses approximately 226 yards of handspun in a gauge of 24 sts = 4 inches, with size 6 needles. (12 ounces of yarn for the medium size pictured). The Trinity (raised bubble stitch) and the Cable stitch, with their inherent elastic quality, provide some stability and shape retention for the alpaca yarn and add wonderful texture.

Knitting with alpaca is a delightful experience – so soft in hand – but there are a couple of tips to making it even more pleasurable. Use wooden needles – either bamboo, birch, or walnut. Alpaca is slipperier than sheep's wool and wooden needles hold better with-

out being sticky. Secondly, if you want your garment to hold its shape, pick a pattern that includes cables or ribbing-type stitches and use smaller needles for the edging.

Handspun, by nature, varies in yarn diameter. Alternate the skein you are using frequently, and remember that horizontal patterns may not meet at the edges because of this varying diameter. Most critical of all, do a sample swatch using the handspun yarn you've made in the pattern you intend to use: wash it, block it, and study it carefully. Is it the gauge you need? Does it have the effect you want? This is the time to change things – needle size or pattern.

"I can't think of anything more satisfying than wearing a sweater that has been handspun and handknit from your own alpaca. For me, it links the heritage of an ancient woman's craft to the present and future. It makes me more a part of the bountiful natural world," says Marta.

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*Marta and her husband, Dave, live in La Veta, CO. Marta has been knitting since she was 10, when her mother taught her the craft to help her recover from whooping cough. Spinning, knitting, and beautiful yarns are now her love and the focus of her business. In addition to a traveling fiber booth featuring handspun, America's Alpaca, and handknit alpaca garments, she wants to provide her neighbors in this rural part of the state with a yarn source other than the big chains. "I'd like to be a part of the reawakening of the heritage crafts – and encourage others to experience their restorative qualities," she says.*

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## Handknit Suri Socks

by Cheryl Andrews

"I knit the socks on a road trip to Oregon, finishing them in the car on our way to a river rafting trip. Usually my feet freeze when we go rafting. The river water fills the bottom of the raft, and my water shoes provide no insulation. I wore my new socks under the shoes, and my feet were much warmer! I've already made another pair of suri socks, and am planning on knitting a luxuriously soft hat," writes Cheryl.

My favorite basic sock pattern comes from the book, *Learn to Knit Socks*, by Edie Eckman. The sock is 48 stitches around, allowing you to choose a design of multiples of 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, 16, 24, or 48. You may also create your own design, or choose from many designs presented in the book *Socks* by Rita Buchanan and Deborah Robson. She always uses a reinforced stitch on the back of the heel, and the last inch of the toe. This reinforced stitch appears in Eckman's book, or you can improvise one of your own. On the right side, it is K1, Sl 1. On the back side, P, twisting the Sl 1 stitches. Each sock used most of a 50 gram ball (1¾ ounce) of commercial Suri, 2 ply, sportweight yarn. Size 3 double pointed needles were used. Always use a natural fiber for socks.

She has knit several pairs of sheep's wool socks, but finds the suri to be far superior in texture – a much softer feel. **Hint:** cast on loosely, or the socks won't slide over your heel. She likes 1½ inches of K1, P1, ribbing, then three inches of design area before starting the heel.

Socks are a great project to keep in a tote bag, ready to travel to meetings, rehearsals, sports practice, school functions – anywhere you need to keep yourself occupied. Keeping your hands busy, keeps you from getting too impatient. Current projects on her needles – a baby hat, (always keep small projects ready to go), an Aran pullover for her husband, a lace cardigan for herself, and a tie-dyed sweater for her daughter. Largest project: two afghans for her children, each made of 81 different squares, each square with a different pattern.

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*Cheryl's grandmother, from Nova Scotia, taught her how to knit when she was eight years old. She used a method of holding the yarn in the left hand, as if to crochet. This allows the knitter to work very quickly. She didn't do much with her new skill until she was a poor college student looking for inexpensive gift ideas. She made everyone a wool ski hat one year! Now she knits all the time, everywhere.*

*Cheryl enjoys designing her own patterns, and has self-published two booklets of knitted doll clothes. She rarely knits a pattern as written. She says, "There's always a new idea waiting to be tried." She teaches math and music at the Rocky Mountain School for the Gifted and Creative in Boulder, CO. Nights and weekends are spent with her husband and 2 children, or playing her French horn with the Flagstaff Brass Quintet.*

**Upcoming topics for the Alpaca Gallery include:** Weaving projects, locker hooking, things for men, and items for kids. Please send text describing the item along with a photo (professional quality not necessary) along with a short bio. Send to Chris Switzer, Box 3800, Estes Park CO 80517. If your item is selected for inclusion in a future column, *Alpacas Magazine* will arrange to have your fiber artwork professionally photographed.