

# Young or Old: Luxurious Alpaca is Great for Everyone

Kaye Collins



Here are two projects that spotlight two of the greatest attributes of alpaca fiber: its diversity of interesting colors, and its exquisite softness. The first project shows how the artist contemplated pattern and color variations to produce a very striking sweater. Project #2, on the other hand, is designed for the “younger set.”

## All-Natural Colors Are The Ticket!

Intrigued by the rich natural colors of huacaya fleeces, I chose to make a sweater set that illustrates five of these fabulous alpaca colors. The fleeces used in these garments include medium brown, shiny true black, light charcoal gray, medium fawn, and white. The main color came from an unusually inspiring fleece from a nine-year-old male (“Sidhartha”) who has lovely reddish highlights, especially in the sunlight.

The large sweater was designed for my husband and the smaller one fits my grandson. I was concerned that an all-alpaca sweater would be heavy and possibly sag. In fact, with careful preparation and spinning techniques, the sweaters weighed less than if they were made with commercial sheep’s wool. The adult knitting pattern came from *Abstract Images* by Lee Anderson and called for worsted weight yarn. My alpaca samples worked up at 20 stitches and 26 rows per 4 inches (10 cm).

I began by washing the alpaca fleeces in dishwashing liquid and allowing them to dry on a window screen elevated over a table. I chose to drum card most of the alpaca fiber, while the fawn was combed to remove broken tips, knots, and fragile fibers. The spinning technique I used is referred to as “point of twist,” a modification of long draw. The fibers are drafted in a way that allows air into the yarn and the spinning hands do not compress the fibers. Alpaca is a smooth,

dense fiber, and compressing it as it is twisted only makes it more dense and heavy. All the yarns were two-ply and weighed approximately 65 yards per ounce (1,040 yards per pound).

The ribbing on the edges of the sweaters is worked alternating two yarns, a fine-weight, handspun brown alpaca yarn and black sheep’s wool. It is a firm corrugated rib that will hold its shape well. The intarsia pattern required the use of several yarns per row. (Intarsia knitting is a colorwork technique in which blocks of color are worked with separate balls of yarns or bobbins. Yarns are not carried across the back and must be twisted at each color change to prevent holes in the work.) Because the alpaca yarns were smooth and slippery, I finished the garments by tacking in the loose yarn ends using sewing thread to secure them and to keep them from working their way out of the fabric.

## Baby Alpaca for Baby People

Fine alpaca is well suited for baby garments. It is silky and soft and raises minimal fuzz. For this baby set, I sampled many different fleeces from first shearing to several fleeces with low micron counts – seeking the fleece with the greatest uniformity and softest “hand.” I found spinning baby-fine alpaca was a real treat. It looks and feels like cashmere, only the fiber is not so short! At times the fiber felt like a merino wool/silk blend. Some of the fleeces had fine

*Facing page – top: lace scarf, and baby’s cap and booties, hand spun and knitted from the fine fleeces of two-year-old huacayas; bottom: matching adult and child sweaters showcase five of the alpacas’ natural colors.*



crimp and this added significant elasticity to the yarns. I drum carded the clean alpaca fibers and spun them with a light and airy technique. The yarns were strong and evidenced a lovely sheen.

The lace scarf is knitted with a fine, two-ply yarn (20 wraps per inch) from a two-year old huacaya alpaca. The baby hat and booties were also from a fleece (second shearing) with a low micron count (20 microns) and consistent fleece. The staple length was five to six inches and after washing it was a sparkling white.

#### **About the Artist**

Kaye Collins lives in Fort Collins, Colorado and owns Fiber to Fabric. She specializes in custom designs using exotic fibers. Kaye received the Certificate of Excellence in Handspinning – Masters Level from the Handweavers Guild of America in 1997 with her specialized study in Spinning Alpaca for Handknitting. Kaye teaches spinning and knitting workshops throughout the United States. Kaye can be reached at (970) 225-2848 or [collins@jymis.com](mailto:collins@jymis.com).

