

Brenda Bothe's world is spinning

BY SHEILA MILLER

BECHTELSTVILLE — At times, all of us feel like our world is spinning, but for Brenda Bothe of Bechtelsville spinning is her world and craft.

The 32-year-old resident of Berks County explained her interest in the craft was sparked about six years ago after she purchased her first spinning wheel. As for spinning materials, anything was fair game, she said, even the undercoat of her Collie dog.

At that time, Brenda said, she was living on an acre lot in Collegeville.

"I wanted to have an animal to produce the fibers I needed for spinning, but sheep were out of the question. So, I started raising Angora rabbits," she recalled. "But then, inevitably, six sheep found their way into my backyard. That's when I moved to Berks County."

Brenda explained she wasn't interested in just any old sheep when she invested in them — she wanted fleeces from naturally colored sheep. This interest in black sheep brought Brenda and her business partner and fiance, Steve Day, together.

"Steve had a small flock of black sheep at his place in Collegeville. Now we probably have the largest flock of naturally colored sheep in eastern Pennsylvania — 30 ewes and their lambs plus 3 rams," Brenda said.

She explained black sheep are not actually coal black in color, but range from gray to brown to dark brown. She added these Karakul sheep are 'goaty' in conformation, so they are crossbred with Corriedales, Hampshires, Romneys, Dorsets, and Suffolks to improve their carcass characteristics and wool.

Along with their naturally colored sheep, Brenda and Steve also raise Romney's, a breed of sheep developed in England for their high-quality white fleeces.

At the present time, their purebred Romney flock consists of 19 ewes and 1 ram, along with about 25 lambs. The ewes normally produce twins after they are two-years-old, with single lambs as yearlings. A number of this year's lambs have been sold already to

breeders in New York, New Jersey, and Maryland, with some going to Pennsylvania clients.

When she moved to the 51 acre farm, Brenda didn't leave behind her Angora rabbits. Hutches in the corn crib and small shed now hold over 30 rabbits — 28 does, 2 bucks, and their litters.

The rabbits are of two varieties, some French but mostly English. According to Brenda, the hair from the English Angoras makes better wool.

Four times a year, Brenda plucks the hair from the rabbits to spin into yarn. She explained the rabbits' coats, with colors of gray, blue, fawn, and white, will shed naturally and new hair will grow in when it reaches 3-inches in length. She said she plucks the loosened hair from the rabbit before it becomes matted, otherwise it will clump together like the hair mats on a shedding dog in need of brushing.

Brenda explained she keeps her rabbits for three years.

"After that amount of time, they don't produce as large a litter and their wool gets coarser," she said. "We like to get eight rabbits per litter, and normally we get anywhere from six to thirteen."

With the yarn that she spins from her rabbits and sheep, Brenda knits garments made from all natural fibers. She has even grown flax and made linen. Last summer, she raised silk worms and has their cocoons ready to process for silk yarn.

"I had these four-inch long silk worms in boxes in the house," she laughed. "As they became ready to spin their cocoons, they kept crawling up and out of their boxes for some reason. I had to keep putting them back. They scared a few of my customers."

Now Brenda has a jar full of the cocoons. She explained she had to bake or boil them to kill the worms and keep them from hatching into butterflies.

Her next step will be to boil the cocoons for about an hour to dissolve the glue excreted by the worm to bind the silk fibers into a cocoon. The rough silk, called mawata, can be dyed in about an hour. Then it's ready for carding or combing and finally spinning.

According to Brenda, it only takes a few hours to spin enough yarn to make a scarf (2 to 3 ounces). She said she uses a lacy stitch when knitting the scarf on her hand loom because the yarn is 'too dear' to use a lot.

"It's so expensive, you can't

afford to make anything big," she smiled.

Brenda, who received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Arts from Temple University, Philadelphia, will be returning to the big city next week to deliver a talk on exotic fibers to the

Philadelphia Handweavers Guild.

Although she majored in art in college, Brenda said most of what she has learned about the craft of spinning and weaving has been self-taught.

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"Knitting looms are as common as sewing machines in Europe," remarked Brenda, as she turned out five-inches of sweater panel in a matter of minutes. She explained the knitting loom is not a new invention, but was patented

in England in the late 1700's. With the aid of this modern model manufactured in Japan, Brenda can complete a sweater, like the one on her lap, in a few hours.



Brenda Bothe, of Bechtelsville, Berks County, creates garments from all natural fibers. Here she uses an Ashford spinning

wheel to convert a sheep's washed and carded fleece into wool yarn.



Brenda plucks the 3-inch long hair from the coats of her Angora rabbits and spins it into luxuriously soft and warm mohair yarn.



With the arrival of Spring, the sheep are about ready to 'lose' their winter woolies. Brenda will be shearing her black sheep and

Romney's, selling the fleeces to handspinners like herself.