

Washing Wool

Wool was an every day part of our ancestor's wardrobes, yet modern people are timid about wearing wool because they are afraid to wash it. Why? Because the modern washing machine has eliminated the lost art of hand washing.

If you have an old ringer wash tub laying around - good for you! But I'm assuming you don't. These directions will teach you how to hand wash your woolens assisted by a modern washing machine.

The secret to washing wool is that wool can be spun (whirling in one direction) in the washing machine, but never agitated (back and forth, back and forth). Your washing machine is designed to agitate the clothes, and you must make sure this never happens to your woolens.

Note that these directions are for knit and crocheted wool items. You should not wash wool felt unless you know how it was made. Many manufacturers use glue when making felt, and if this is the case then washing it in water will dissolve the glue and destroy the fabric. You also should not wash antique wool garments. Many times old wool has become brittle, and washing it will break the fibers, destroying the garment. To "clean" your woolen antiques brush off any loose dirt, put the garment outside to let the fresh air remove odors, and then be content that it's as clean as it's going to get.

Washing Woolens (Knit or Crocheted items, or Yarn Twisted into a Skein)

Start *near* your washing machine (but not using it just yet), fill a container with warm-hot water. It should be warmer than lukewarm, but not so hot that you can't stick your hand in it. Any bucket or bowl will work. I use a picnic cooler, which is not only large enough to hold a lot of wool (I can wash 40 skeins of yarn at a time) but it also retains the heat so that the water stays hot throughout the soaking process.

If you have trouble finding a container large enough to soak your large woolen items you can use the washing machine as your "bucket." This will only work with an *older* washing machine. My new washing machine won't hold water – it automatically drains out even if the machine is turned off.

Add detergent to your bucket, any brand will do. Although I go cheap on my regular laundry, I use Tide for my woolens. The amount doesn't matter, since you are going to rinse it out anyway, but remember that a little goes a long way. Usually a tablespoon or two is enough for a small bowl. I use a half cup for my picnic cooler.

Add the woolens to the water and let them slowly absorb the water. This may take a while. You can reach in and gently squish the items with your hands, but don't go crazy swirling them all around. They usually sink, but if you have floaters then put a dinner plate on top to keep them underwater. Let the items soak for about 30 minutes.



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Remove the items from the water and put them in your washing machine. A newer washing machine will have a spin-only option (mine is labeled “Drain & Spin” on the dial), on an older machine you need to manually turn to the spin cycle. Note that you are not starting the machine from the beginning and going through the whole cycle; you are going directly to the spin cycle because you only want to spin. Stand next to the machine and let the items spin for a few minutes. This will remove most of the water. Turn the machine off. Your woolens will be damp, but not soaking wet.

If you have an old ringer wash tub, replace the washing machine spin cycle step by running your wet wool through the ringer. This is a great activity for a historic site!

If your washing machine just will not spin without going through the whole cycle, you can squeeze the water out of the wool with your hands. Hand-squeezed garments will take more soaks in the rinse water and will take longer to dry, because your hands just can't get all of the water out like a washing machine or a ringer will.

Meanwhile, dump out your soapy water and refill the bowl, bucket or picnic cooler with clean water the same temperature you used before. Soak your woolens in the clean water for about ten minutes. Again, remove the items from the water and spin them in the washing machine. Repeat the clean-water ten minute soak again. You are done when the rinse water is clear (no dirt or soap) at the end of your ten minute soak.

I usually soak the woolens in the soapy water once and soak in clean rinse water twice.

Let the items air dry. Yarn can be unskeined and hung on a plastic hanger to dry. Garments should be laid on a drying rack or a towel to dry (not hung, which may stretch them out).

Enjoy your wool!

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