

You get what you pay for

When it comes to materials, what are you prepared to pay? **Shannon Denny** investigates the wide world of yarn – from très cher to chic to the downright cheap

It's a mistake many of us have made; you see a luscious pattern that calls for a yarn that's a bit decadent. A quick check of the change purse reveals you can't quite stretch to the mohair the pattern suggests. No problem, you might say, your eyes spying balls of cheap and cheerful acrylic in the bargain bin. Your savvy shopping has won the day... or has it?

Knit your yarn and follow the pattern as rigorously as you like, but don't be surprised when the finished product only bears a passing resemblance to the photograph. The model looks so cosy and smug in her gently draping wrap, while your scratchy version stands on

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your shoulders like it's contemplating take-off.

The fact is some of the things we most desire fall outside our price bracket. There's a reason that Louis Vuitton knock-off costs a tenner down the market but thousands in the Bond Street flagship shop. Monsieur Vuitton uses cowhide, brass hardware, canvas or suede lining and gold stitching. The artisans in the Vuitton atelier don't fall for the charms of cheaper substitutes scavenged from cut-price sources. And if your goal is to devote hours to something divinely luxurious that calls for fine materials, neither should you.

Of course, that's not to say all projects have to break the bank. A dazzling blend with a nice price is ideal for a shopping bag, so

save lustrous alpaca for a form-fitting sweater. Knitting is inexpensive in that you don't have to buy a ticket or even travel anywhere to do it, and by executing all the labour yourself, you're not paying anyone else to rustle up a garment on your behalf. But at the end of the day, materials do equal money and some yarns cost more than others. If you're going to pour hours into knitting something though, you might as well make it the best it can be, so choose a yarn appropriate to your project.

Behind the price

Rachael Matthews has taught scores of people to knit through her shop Prick Your Finger, and she says new knitters are sometimes

surprised at the cost of yarn. "It's expensive if you're going to buy a good pure wool, but it's down to the CPW – cost per wear," she explains. "If you're going to invest all that time, then the wear that you get out of what you make will be infinitely more valuable than going out to buy a jumper."

Yarns derived from animal sources tend towards the upper end of the price spectrum, and the reason for it is simple: animals cost money to buy initially and further investment to keep alive. Beate Kubitz of knitwear label Makepiece is someone who understands this fact more intimately than most; she is a farmer who raises a flock of 70 Shetland sheep in the Pennines.

Her farming year starts in November.

"I'm lugging bales of hay around and checking their mouths; general upkeep and maintenance continues till April. Then you've got lambing, which is brilliant but also quite gruelling. Shetland sheep are kind of semi-feral – they do look after themselves, but you have tiny little lambs from Shetlands. They're like bunny rabbits, so you have to be careful of hypothermia and foxes."

Beate runs through a catalogue of further work, including disease prevention, hay making and shearing. "There's a lot of labour that goes into keeping sheep for a year, frankly!" But in addition to the bottom line of keeping animals, she's quick to point out that some of the cost of a ball of yarn is down to spinning techniques. To give a fibre a special effect – to make it extra fuzzy or bouncy for example – requires additional and specialised spinning. "You're going through three or four processes just to create a fancy yarn," she says. "That's partly why they're expensive."

The rich list

So far though we've only been talking about sheep, which are relatively inexpensive animals in the wool spectrum. "A British female alpaca will cost you two grand; a sheep will cost you £40," Beate exclaims. The alpaca is limited to life in cold habitats. Luminous and silky, alpaca fleece is similar to hair in its physical structure. Sheared just once every two years, each animal provides only about five pounds of wool at a shearing, so the high price is thanks not just to its inherently desirable features but also to the small yield. Use it to make gorgeous socks that you plan to wear in the coldest days of winter.

Often used in fibre blends to add lustre and sheen, mohair comes from the Angora goat, an



animal that's not known for being particularly hardy. Mohair increases in diameter as a goat ages, so only the fibres from younger animals can be used to make yarn for clothes. Angora wool meanwhile comes from the downy coat of Angora rabbits. It's admired for its silky texture and halo, or fluff factor. You'll often find angora combined with wool since on its own it lacks elasticity. Neither of these options will be the answer if you're making a giant Aran jumper for the gent in your life, but give them a go in a pretty hat or slippery scarf.

While sheep and Angora goats can yield 10 pounds of wool in a shearing, cashmere goats are nowhere near as prolific. These little guys produce a double fleece; their underdown is fine and soft, but the outer coating or guard hair is coarse. The additional process of separating the underdown from the guard hair adds to the cost, and cashmere goats only produce new fibre once a year during moulting season. It takes about a week to comb out by hand, generating a mere 4 ounces of cashmere down. Buy

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a few beautiful balls for a covetable cardigan you'll keep forever.

There's one luxurious animal-derived fibre that doesn't come from a four-legged friend, and that of course is silk. Silkworms feed on mulberry leaves before forming cocoons. The threads from multiple cocoons are unwound to create raw silk. It takes around 30,000 silkworms to produce 12 pounds of raw silk. Twisting four to eight silk filaments together yields a single strand of silk thread – all of which helps explain why this shimmery stuff tends to be so expensive. It's a good option for a dainty springtime shrug.

Cheaper choices

So what's the alternative to these yarns from the animal kingdom? With their independence from the whims of nature, synthetic fibres are almost always going to be cheaper than natural ones. And the good news is, there are plenty of excuses to use them.

If you're wary of the ravages of moths, colour fading or shrinking, you'll appreciate the durability of acrylic. Synthetic yarn is particularly suited to garments that need to be laundered rather than hand-washed – any mum will tell you there are benefits to baby clothes that can just be chucked in the wash. Acrylic doesn't breathe, so use it in projects where this isn't a disadvantage, like a beach blanket, glam evening bag or cute tea cosy. Remember also that synthetics can actually help you make the

most of your investment in a more expensive yarn – you can always use a budget buy to try out a pattern before completing a final version in your swanky stuff.

The first acrylic yarn – trademarked as Orlon – was created by Dupont in 1941; the women's sweater boom in the 1950s sealed its popularity. Acrylic fibres are produced from a petrochemical called acrylonitrile, which is then combined with other chemicals to achieve various effects in the resulting yarn. The manufacture of acrylic fibre in the US and Europe has dropped off sharply in the last two decades, and production has shifted almost entirely to developing nations. Here the labour costs are low, which helps maintain acrylic's status as the economical choice for knitters.

For true recessionistas though, the answer to all our yarn problems is lurking not in a chemistry lab, nor on a remote Himalayan peak – instead it may be hiding in the charity shop. Harvest wool from old sweaters – hand-knitted, chunky ones are easiest to unravel. Or slice and dice a t-shirt into

a long, continuous spiral strip to obtain yarn without opening your wallet. Lisa Margreet, a champion of these thrifty techniques, runs workshops with The Craft Guerrilla on t-shirt yarn. "We keep on finding more things that you can make with it," she says. "Knitted and crochet items that need a chunky yarn with a bit of stretch to it work best."

Which just goes to show, there's a fun application for each and every yarn out there, whether it's precious and rare, or prolific and pocket-friendly. ●

A few knitty gritty facts

- The closest relatives of the alpaca are camels and llamas.
- The word mohair is derived from an Arabic term for "select" or "choice".
- Tibetan cashmere is considered the best in world because its fibres are so long.
- Unwind a silkworm's cocoon and you'll find yourself the owner of a silk filament up to 900m in length.
- Chemical cousins of acrylic yarn include Perspex, Lucite and Plexiglas.

Fluffy



Mohair goat Hey kid, you lookin' at me?

Fluffier



Cashmere goat It's tiring looking this good.

Fluffiest



British angora rabbit What do you mean, I need a trim?