

How to Choose a Spinning Wheel

Some tips and considerations from fellow guild member

Carolyn Rivello

Looks -

Looks are completely a matter of personal preference. But **do not** buy a wheel if you don't like its looks. You won't get pleasure from sitting at it. Conversely, don't let the look of the wheel completely control the purchase. It doesn't matter how pretty it is if it doesn't spin well or suit your purposes.

Price -

Expect to spend between \$400 and \$800 the first time around if buying a new wheel. There are a number of very good wheels in the \$500 - \$600 range. It's better to save money and get what will serve your purposes, than to buy cheap that will not do what you need. However, if you buy simple & outgrow it, you can sell to a new spinner. If taken care of, wheels will not lose value. Do not buy a plastic wheel *just because* it's cheap. Better to buy one you assemble and stain yourself to save money, or buy used from someone who is upgrading. *Do not let price be single controlling factor.*

Style -

-Castle wheels and Upright wheels - are vertical, take up less room but drive wheel usually smaller- you will have to work harder and longer- check ratios to see if wheel will suit your needs, these two types are generally more portable (not GOLDING, though)

-Saxony wheels - are horizontal, take up more room but drive wheel larger, produce more work for less effort, but usually less portable (but ASHFORD Traditional not bad to put in car)

Treadle -

How does the treadle work? Does your foot bend up or away? Does it matter to you? (LOUET bends away (extend), most others bend up (flex)).

Single or double? - DT is more work but some say less strain. But if wheel a good one, there should be no "strain" in treading it, especially wheels with ball bearings. In fact, if it is very hard to treadle, whether single or double, *don't buy it.* Wheel should move smoothly and easily with very little effort on your part.

Double treadle twice the work of single. On a single treadle, one treadle is one wheel revolution. On most DT's, need to complete two treadles for one wheel revolution. Some DT's are 1.5 revolutions for 2 treadles. Still more work than single. Also, because of this, you are treadling much faster on a DT, which is also less efficient energy-wise. If wheel does not have very large range of ratios and many are not on higher end, you are definitely working harder than you need to. If the ratios are higher, it makes up for some of that.

You do keep good posture with DT since you must sit facing front and both feet are pointed straight ahead. But this seriously limits your spinning style. Long draw is much more difficult on a DT. If you like to use long draw, you will have to twist your upper body since you can't angle your feet, and that can quickly get very uncomfortable, if not downright painful. On a single treadle, you can angle your body whatever way is most comfortable. If you like to spin long draw a lot, getting a wheel with an orifice on the left or that can be adjusted (MAJACRAFT) will make the work most comfortable.

Before choosing a wheel, sit at BOTH single and double treadle models.

Size of drive wheel/Ratios -

What kind of yarn do you want to spin? Rug yarn, sock yarn? Low-twist yarns? High twist yarns?

If you only want to spin super bulky, ASHFORD Country Spinner is made specifically for that. If you want to spin ultra-fine yarns, LENDRUM is a good choice. Most wheels are "all-purpose" wheels and have at least 3 or 4 ratios, commonly ranging from about 6:1 up to about 17:1. Some wheels have high-speed flyers or bobbins. Check ratios, some high-speed flyers aren't much higher than other wheel's norms. "Higher" is relative, but anything over about 15:1 will be good for fine yarns. If you plan to spin cotton or a lot of exotics - alpaca, angora, mohair, you will need higher ratios. MAJACRAFT has low-speed bobbins also. The purpose of ratios is **not speed, but efficiency.**

For the widest range of spinning, try to choose something that ranges between 7:1 or 8:1 as the lowest and 14:1 or 15:1 as the highest. Even up to 12:1 or 13:1 is probably more than sufficient for most everyone.

Drive type & tension set-up -

-*Double drive* - most picky, hardest for beginners, but allows for very minute adjustments

-*Single drive* - easier for beginners, drive band and bobbin tension can be adjusted separately

Single drive can be either bobbin lead - flyer is braked- bobbin keeps winding and draws yarn on- called Irish or German tension; or flyer lead - bobbin is braked- flyer spins yarn around it and on- called Scotch tension. Most wheels on market are flyer-lead. Some have all three options- SCHACHT, for example.

-*Direct Drive* - drive wheel directly driven by treadle. Sometimes by rubber or plastic cone-shaped piece attached to footman that directly touches wheel. Found in very portable wheels like Hitchhiker. Sometimes these wheels are a bit noisy. Very light, some find them wobbly. Not so versatile as the others. Orifice is very low and angled, might not be comfortable depending on how you spin. Generally less ratios. Great for vacations, road trips. Small enough to spin as a passenger in larger vehicles. Best for a second wheel, not a main wheel.

Bobbins -

-*Bobbin size* - Is it a big bobbin? Will it take you forever to fill it? If so, will you get impatient and not want to spin so long before plying? Will you spin finer yarns? Then it will take even more time to fill. JW is considered small bobbin by many, but can still fit almost 150 plied yards of worsted weight yarn. Many commercial balls are much smaller than that. (Commercial sport weight 50g balls are about 110 yards, commercial 50g worsted are much less). LOUET'S bobbins are very large and can hold quite a lot. Most bobbins hold from 3- 6 oz. Think of how bobbin size will affect you. If you make many small projects, a so-called "small" bobbin might work very well for you. If you have a 3oz bobbin and you fill two and ply them, you have 6oz of yarn. That's more than enough for a pair of socks, mittens, slippers, knee warmers, some hats, small scarves, small knitted purses, wrist warmers or fingerless mitts, many baby things, neckwarmers, headbands, wash cloths, cell phone cases, water bottle holders, cat toys, laceweight shawls, etc, etc, etc.

-*Ease of changing* - Do you have to take wheel apart just to change bobbin? Is it awkward to change? Do you seem to need three hands, or is it relatively easy? Do you have a tendency to drop things? You can easily drop and damage parts if everything has to come off every time you change bobbin (JW the ultimate in ease of bobbin changing).

-*Fat-core bobbins* - Nice to have, but you can make yourself. If you spin a lot of fine yarns or exotics, they will be very useful, probably necessary. The fat core makes less of a pull on the yarn, which will help keep very fine yarns from breaking and give you more control. Make by cutting foam-type pipe insulation to fit bobbin length (find pipe insulation at hardware store).

-*Extra bobbins* - Most spinners spin 2-ply yarn. So, you need three bobbins- two for spinning and one to ply onto. Three is the standard that comes with a wheel. Some come with more (e.g. MAJACRAFT, ASHFORD TRAVELLER, LENDRUM). Many people have more than one project going at once so want more bobbins. If you demo, it's nice to have an empty one so you can let people try the wheel without letting them try it with what you're spinning. Also, if you break one, it's good to have one more so you aren't stuck being unable to spin until you replace it. And it's good for multiple-ply yarns. You'll need four bobbins for a 3-ply, five bobbins for a 4-ply. **But**- it's not good to have so many and to leave singles on bobbins for weeks or months, because twist will set and your plying will lie to you. Unless you count treadles in your singles and match with the correct amount of plying twist, don't be tempted to have too many bobbins. One or two extra bobbins is enough. Any more is unnecessary.

High-speed bobbins/flyers -

If you think you will want to spin cotton or very fine yarns, might consider this. I've spun cotton with a LENDRUM very-fast flyer (44:1) and it's wonderful. MAJACRAFT also has high-speed, up to 45:1.

Lazy Kate -

Does wheel come with one? Separate or built in? Tensioned or not? If you want to spin very fine yarns, exotics, or silk, a tensioned lazy kate helps greatly. How many bobbins will it hold? Built-in not really the best, but adequate. See how it is positioned- to the left, the right, or one or two pegs on each side? Will it be comfortable for you to ply from that position?

Orifice size -

Bigger is for larger diameter yarns. Too big with very thin yarn allows yarn to vibrate too much in orifice. Many wheels are 1/2" for "all purpose" yarns. ASHFORD country spinner is 7/8". Antique wheels usually narrower, if made for flax spinning.

Orifice type (regular, delta, Journey Wheel U-shaped) -

Regular orifice needs orifice hook-- and every time yarn breaks, you have to rethread. No rethreading on delta orifice or JW.

Orifice Height/placement -

How tall are you? If it is too high or too low, you will be uncomfortable. Some tall people have trouble with the smaller wheels like the ASHFORD Kiwi or the HITCHHIKER, some don't. Will you be constantly bending forward to accommodate for the angle? Must spin on one and see.

How will you draft? To the left? The right? Directly in front of you? Is the orifice on the left? The right? In the center? Is this where you draft? If not, you may be uncomfortable. Some authorities argue that height is irrelevant as yarn will go onto bobbin whatever the angle. You must try for yourself. I feel it is better to have the yarn roughly centered, not scraping along the edges of the orifice. Some of the MAJACRAFTs have the ability to move the placement of the orifice from right to left.

Portability -

Will you take it with you or will it stay at home? Will it fit in your car? Even when you buy a new car? Does it fold down? Does it have a handle? If not, where will you pick it up? You won't want to grab it on a delicate part. Do parts stick out that can break off? It's harder to get a wheel into a 2-door car.

Weight -

Included in portability issue. Will you take wheel out or leave at home? If it stays at home, it doesn't matter. How heavy is it? Most weigh about 12-18 lbs. Can you carry it the distances you need to? Will you strap it on a dolly?

Also, when spinning- does it weigh enough that it won't walk across floor as you treadle? Or want to tip over forward? *Very important.*

Drive band -

Cotton or poly? If poly, make sure to keep oil off of it. It will weaken band. How much are replacements? Are they easy to get? Will you have to order on line? Will shipping cost be many times price of band? Should **always** have extra drive band on hand.

Repair kits/tools -

Does it come with one or can you purchase one? Does it need special parts for small repairs? How easy are they to get? How expensive are they? JW uses rubber bands & fishing wire for tensioning. No need to order anything else. Some others use same. Some need special parts.

Covers -

Does it come with cover or can you buy one, or make one? Really only need if taking it out.

Electric Wheels -

There are several brands of electric wheels on the market. They are more expensive than most wheels. Many people use them for plying because they are fast. They are also very portable, but wherever you take it, there must be a power source- no spinning on the beach! You can carry a 12 volt battery for a power source. Many who would not be able to spin otherwise because of various handicaps, including such things as fibromyalgia or multiple sclerosis, can use an electric wheel. I have spun on several and liked them all. If you're handy and you have an old wheel you don't want, you can wire it with a small motor (I've seen this done to an old LOUET) for your own electrified wheel. Consider these like any other; check bobbin size, ratios, and lazy kate- compare among brands- find best for you.

Antique Wheels -

Antique wheels are wonderful, but an antique wheel probably shouldn't be your first wheel. There are a whole slew of considerations in determining if an antique wheel should be purchased or not, that you do not have to concern yourself with if you buy a modern wheel. Also, if you have never owned any wheel, you can't know what might be missing, broken, replaced or incorrect on an antique wheel that would affect value or spinnability. You have no basis to know if any antique wheel would be a good spinner or not. Do not be tempted. Please. Or, *at least*, do not buy it until you talk to those of us in the guild who own them. If someone gives you one, bring it to guild, we will let you know if it is worth the time and effort you will need to put into it to get it spinning. Antique wheels are not beginner wheels. Romantic as they are, choose a modern wheel for your first wheel.

Well-known brands, well-made, trustworthy:

Ashford - Traditional, Elizabeth, Traveller, Joy, Kiwi, Country Spinner

Kromski - Polonaise, Minstrel, Mazurka, Symphony, Sonata, Prelude

Lendrum - folding wheel, saxony

Louet - s-10, s-15, s-51, s-75, Julia, Victoria

Majacraft - Suzie, Suzi Pro, Suzie Alpaca, Rose, Little Gem, Pioneer

Schacht - Matchless, Ladybug, Sidekick (portable)

Direct drive:

HitchHiker, Road Bug, Hatbox - can take on a plane, train or bus

Electric Wheels:

Hansen (*very high quality*), **Roberta, Ashford**

Some Others:

Columbine - decent wheel, but ratios very low- great for softer, heavier, high-loft yarns.

Thomas Golding - beautiful but *very expensive*, spins wonderfully- not portable, large, wonderful piece of machinery, effortless to spin on. Very high quality.

Journey Wheel - can take as carry-on on plane, train or bus- folds up, protecting working parts (and your spinning). This wheel is my main wheel- has done everything I demanded of it for ten years, including taking me through the OHS spinning course. I expect it to take me through an in-depth study, too.

Rick Reeves - (now made by Schacht) Several different-sized drive wheels available, quality wheel, less portable

Robin - several styles

SpinOlution - treadles side-to-side. Bee is very portable.

Babe - Too light, no stability. Every one I have seen squeaks, wobbles, walks across floor. I've seen more than one Babe owner hold wheel down with other foot- very bad, awful waste of energy and awkward- makes you tense while spinning- bad posture, bad ergonomics. You'll note above under "Weight" that I make a point about wheels walking across floor. This applies to all wheels, not just this one, but I've never spun on a Babe that doesn't walk. And wobble. Will not keep it's value like wooden wheels. (Some may argue with all that. In fact, some *will* argue. Many people love these wheels. I do not think they are worth spending money on. That is both my educated opinion and my personal experience with these wheels- take it for what it's worth to you.)

Hopefully, this will help you pick a wheel that is best for you. Again- much of this is personal preference- what works for one might not work for another- but if you've never bought a wheel, you don't even know the questions to ask. I tried to anticipate and hit all the usual points and more. What I have presented are my opinions based on my 12 years of spinning and my OHS education. Some may have other opinions based on their own experiences. Talk to as many wheel owners as possible, try every wheel you can, and then use your own judgment.

Happy spinning to all!