

BLENDING BOARD TIPS

Thinking Beyond Rolags

BY DEBORAH HELD

The blending board.

It's cool for making rolags, but a serious spinner—much less a professional fiber dyer—wouldn't choose one over, say, a drumcarder, a hackle, or other “real” blending tools, right?

I disagree.

Sure, drumcarders are some sexy beasts, but they are large pieces of equipment with price tags to match. For those working from home with limited living space (and charged with keeping tiny hands and paws safe at all times), it is much easier to tackle one's fiber preparation needs with a single portable, collapsible, and affordable carding item.

To the rescue cometh the blending board. Smooth batts, textured art batts, dizzed roving made from custom blends . . . These and more are possible with only a blending board on hand, plus its accompanying dowels and brushes. The key is to know how to look at this board from a broader perspective.

WORKING SMARTER

Fiber artist Jessica Henderson did just this back in 2013 when she launched her online shop Topeka Twister. Living in a home that measures 1,100 square feet with a recent college graduate husband and their three young children, an expensive drumcarder was “out of the question,” says Jessica. Rolags and other basic forms of blended fiber had always been Jessica's vision, and so her father made her a hackle.

“It was fine,” she says, but sharp—dangerous for those small fingers. Instead, Jessica eagerly purchased a blending board upon watching Ashford's YouTube video.

Jessica was thrilled with the rolags she was getting from her new blending board, but a then-new business relationship led her to commit to expanding her skill set to create and deliver several dozen smooth blended batts as her share of a monthly subscription fiber club box—despite not having yet made even one for her own online store. But Jessica forged ahead and eventually came to the realization that she could roll these “baby batts” (so called due to their size and weight) up and off of her blending board just as easily as she could rolags. The only real difference was in the amount of fiber packed onto the board: by packing the blending board a bit more heavily, she could make a batt that would hold together and remain pliable once it was lifted from the board. A bit

of creative experimentation yielded a small, perfectly rolled, ribbon-tied batt for Jessica and Topeka Twister. Gradients weighing 1 to 1¼ ounce became her own “baby batt” staple and are still sold in her online store.

Although Jessica uses a blending board for small batts, larger batts are easily possible on a blending board, as are textured batts. With possibilities ranging from lightly textured, perhaps with pulled sari silk, to full-on “art batts” loaded with curly locks and snippets of salvaged lace, tulle, or ribbon, you're limited only by your own imagination. The manner in which you layer and blend your fiber and add-ins is the same, regardless of whether your batt is silky smooth or not.

Jessica's secret weapon: “I utilize the overhang,” better known as that couple of inches of excess blended fiber that hangs across the bottom edge of the carding cloth, just under the teeth. She's not alone.

April Wolf of Phoenix Fiber Company, who cofounded the “Spin the Box” service with Jessica, also began her business using just a blending board for rolags and batts. As with Jessica, with young children underfoot, safety was a factor, but cost, more so. Unlike many in fiber-related businesses, Wolf sees herself as more chemist than artist. After watching several YouTube videos about fiber blending, she was initially intrigued by handcards. “I need control over my own palette,” she says, which she knew she would get from a blending board. She set about making her own 18-by-12-inch board using a section of carding cloth she'd purchased from a Ravelry de-stash for a total cost of about \$80. Wolf likens her custom board to a giant handcard. She even uses it as such, flipping it around so that the bottom overhang of fiber is up at the top when she's ready to roll off her rolags and batts. Her board fits at least 2 ounces of fiber and add-ins, including the 2 to 3 inches of overhang she makes sure to build in. Wolf compares this blended overhang to the doffering area on a drumcarder, from which you lift up and remove a batt. On the blending board, using dowels or similar rods “helps give you something to hold onto . . . so the fibers come up easier.”

Being the scientific person she is, Wolf weighs out each portion of wool, sparkle, silk, or other fiber, and she has a set formula for crafting batts on her blending board. In the past several months, she has added a drumcarder to her mix of fiber prep equipment to speed up her production of large blended batts.

Building a Better Batt

Of course, every fiber artist has his or her own method for making batts that are not only beautiful on the outside but are easy to spin all the way through (and won't leave bits of sparkle all over their customers' living room floors). In general, our experts agree that:

- The first layer you lay down on your board is what people see first, as this will be the outside of the batt when it's rolled up. If you've got a shiny element, such as bamboo, Angelina, Firestar, silk, or Soysilk, start with a light layer of that (figure 1). It doesn't need to be a full layer.
- Next, add a thin layer of your wool—locks or combed top—using a hard-bristle paintbrush or a soft-bristle grooming brush to help guide the wool and your add-ins and to tamp down areas as you work (figure 2).
- To ensure that the fiber and accompanying bling or blends of fibers with varying staple lengths adhere together, as well as to smooth down raised areas of built-up layering, you'll need to brush the wool using either an actual burnishing brush or a cat or dog grooming brush with wire teeth. Start burnishing during the first two or three layers whenever you need to blend or smooth your fibers, and continue until your board is packed (figure 3).
- Alternate thin layers in this manner until the board is full, burnishing every few layers. For added appeal, you can match the top layer of your batt to the bottom, whether by rolling on an additional layer of silk or Firestar or even curly, bright locks to match the fiber with which you started.

Always use the very best of materials, especially your wools. While fiber from any of your favorite short-to-medium-stapled breeds will likely do, a low micron count (no higher than 20) will ensure a soft, lofty batt for spinning. Blend in luxury fibers such as yak or camel, or even alpaca, for added lushness.



Rolling Off a Batt

- To roll the fiber batt off the blending board, use both hands—one on each side—to grasp and loosen the overhang area up and off the board (figure 4).
- Clasp that fiber between two dowel rods and start to roll (figure 5), stopping to check for fiber that may stick to the board. (If this happens, just tease it out using the tip of a knitting needle and press it back into the roll.) Keep rolling, not too tightly, stopping to check for stragglers every so often and making sure not to draft the fiber.
- To make a larger batt, simply reload the board, roll off the next batt, and lay the second one atop the first, being sure to match the overhang edges before laying the top batt down. Or lay the two batts flat on your workspace with the overhang edges facing each other. Move one so it overlaps the other slightly, and then connect them together with your flicker brush (figure 6). Fold up as desired.



However, she still uses her homemade blending board to craft her company's rolags and small batts. "It really came down to time management," she says. "Otherwise, as a hobbyist, the blending board is fully sufficient for any and all carded fiber preparation."

GETTING CREATIVE

Some people see a tool or a device and cannot help but think of every which way they can put that tool to use—often in ways that device was not intended to be used. Beth Lower, who operates Blue Mountain Handcrafts with her family from rural Virginia, is one of those people.

Beth has every tool on earth for fiber preparation available to her: Her husband, Eric, is a carpenter and builder of the handcombs they sell through their online store. The couple also has a close friendship with Ron High and family, owners of the Fancy Kitty blending tools company. Each tool has its place in her workday. But come evening, says Beth, she's all about her blending board, which she helped Fancy Kitty design several years ago after reading about blending boards on Ravelry and wanting one for herself. Thanks to its portability, Beth can spend time with her family,

watching TV while blending rolags, dizzing specialty blends of roving, and rolling up rolags—Beth’s own creation (right)—for her shop. “I just throw my blending board, a bunch of fiber, and my add-ins in a laundry basket, and I’m ready,” says Beth.

Beth says that with blending boards’ simple design, she knew right away that “there had to be more that you can do with these than make rolags.” Continuous, hand-pulled, dizzed roving and the rolags are two of Beth’s most successful offshoots thus far.

ROVING FROM A BLENDING BOARD

This technique yields a fascinating blending of fibers and colors as they swirl from your board through the diz, and it takes place right before your eyes. (Note: Handmade dizzes may be purchased online, but a button, a metal washer, or the top of a spice jar—as seen in our photos—work just as well.)

The continuous motion of pulling the fibers horizontally across the teeth of the blending board and down through the diz mimics the kind of blending you’d get from using a hackle or combs, says Beth, because the blending board helps to align the fibers in much the same manner. Best of all, hand-pulled roving is so much more lush and so much less dense than any millspun version of “custom-blended roving” mass-produced in mills and available for purchase on the Internet, says Beth. It’s a true joy to spin.

For an even bolder look, randomly place a mash-up of colors when loading your wools and other fibers to the blending board, then diz the fibers into a collection of crazy, blended roving balls. They’re addictive, both to spin and to create. You can blend together absolutely anything you have on hand—even semi-smooth or highly textured art roving. “The sky’s the limit,” she says. With practice, almost anyone can yield astonishingly beautiful results.

Something Different: Rolags

For something equally captivating but that takes moments to create and is foible-proof, try making a rolag.

- Quickly layer the board with your favorite selection of colors (with or without added bling).
- Beginning at the overhang and using dowels, lift and roll the batt up (and off) into one giant rolag (so called because of its large “loglike” shape).
- To ensure that the rolag is sealed closed, simply lay it on the blending board with the seam down and gently press it against the teeth of the board in a quick, forward-rolling motion, allowing the blending board to act as a burnishing brush and seal your rolag closed (figure 7).
- When you spin your ‘log, Beth suggests pulling from the inside to get the full spiral effect, although you can really draft from anywhere just as with a regular rolag.



Hand-Pulling Fiber Using a Diz

- Load your blending board with light layers of wool, shimmery or textured add-ins, sparkle, or other fibers as for a basic batt; the order doesn't matter, though thinly layering helps ensure even blending of add-ins. Burnish them together, making sure you've got a good even layer of blended fiber overhang at the base of the blending cloth.
- At one corner, grip a section of the overhang fiber about two fingers wide, twisting the ends so that you can thread them through your diz (a small crochet hook may be beneficial for this). The more textured the blend you've created, the larger the hole you'll need, "large" being a relative term. If the hole is too big, the diz won't provide the resistance needed to draft the fiber into roving as you pull it through.
- In one continuous motion, and working from side to side horizontally (which allows the fiber to draft and blend while using the full width of the board), hold the diz in your nondominant hand. While pushing against it for support, pull the fiber through the diz (figure 8), working against the natural "tug" of resistance the blending board offers and pulling just hard enough so as not to tear the fiber. The fiber will naturally draft downward as you continue to work horizontally. Work back and forth, side to side, with the "push and pull" action of both hands, until you have slowly made your way all the way up the blending board.



"It's really very versatile for such a simple tool," says Beth of the blending board. She adds that easy cleanup, using a size 1 knitting needle to remove excess bits of fluff from between the teeth and perhaps a damp cloth to wipe down the finished wood, makes her blending board a go-to tool for small projects.

As for Jessica, who carefully manages her livelihood during the free snippets of time in her daily schedule, the control factor of the blending board can't be beat. Late at night, she simply stores away her supplies in large plastic totes, out of reach of small fingers. She has no plans "in the foreseeable future" to change out her equipment, either. Her blending board suits her needs just perfectly. 🐾

Deborah Held is an Atlanta-based freelance writer who spins and knits (okay, mostly spins). Debbie lives with Iggy, her needy Italian greyhound, and his sister Delia, a rapidly aging, overweight beagle. Find her online at www.debbiehheld.com.

RESOURCES

Ashford blending board video,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FenT3pshrU
Blue Mountain Handcrafts, www.bluemountainhandcrafts.com
Fancy Kitty, www.fancy-kitty.com
Phoenix Fiber Co., www.phoenixfiberco.com
Topeka Twister, www.topekatwister.com