



Joan spinning cotton while riding her horse Cody.

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Joan Ruane is the kind of person who keeps her word. When cotton-spinning gurus Harry and Olive Linder (*Handspinning Cotton*, The Cotton Squares, 1977) retired, Joan promised them she would continue their legacy of teaching spinners that cotton is just as easy to spin as any other fiber.

She has become one of the most influential teachers of cotton spinning, traveling throughout North America and New Zealand, teaching workshops, giving lectures, and producing her own brand of Easy to Spin cotton fiber preparations for handspinners.

Her adventure into the world of spinning began in 1972 when her husband decided to move their young family to the North Island of New Zealand. In a country of three million people and thirty

With Joan Ruane

BY IRENE LAUGHING
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million sheep, Joan realized that she'd need to learn to spin. A neighbor was willing to teach her, and like so many of us, her world was never the same. She sought out every opportunity to spin the island's wool.

The family abruptly moved back to the States, and Joan's spinning moved along at a slower pace—slow but never to a standstill. Once settled near Tallahassee, Florida, Joan became involved with local spinning guilds and spent many hours demonstrating at the Tallahassee Museum teaching spinning to anyone interested in turning fibers into yarn. Her enthusiasm then, as it is now, was contagious.

Wool, silk, dog hair, and linen were all satisfactory fibers for her to spin. Yet it wasn't until Joan took a workshop with Persis Grayson that her spinning life took off again. Persis knew how to instill a love of spinning in her students by introducing them to many types of fibers.

Spinning cotton was love at first touch for Joan Ruane. She loved how this cellulose plant fiber—so white, soft, and lofty—could be spun into a very fine yarn. Yet she needed to know more, lots more, about cotton spinning. Everyone she spoke with said that cotton's short staple made it difficult to spin. She just didn't believe them. "Look at your jeans. Everyone is wearing spun cotton. It just can't be that complicated to spin, even if by hand."

During the spinning revival of the 1970s, cotton was presented as being difficult to spin, not only by authors of how-to books but by wheel manufacturers and fiber suppliers. Spinning wheels didn't have the ratios that they now have to spin short-staple fibers, and cotton fiber suppliers were usually sourcing only short-staple upland cotton grown in the southeastern United States. This had to change before cotton would be welcomed into the hearts of handspinners.

Along came Harry and Olive Linder, whose self-published small yellow-cover booklet *Handspinning Cotton*, was a treasured source of everything you

needed to know about spinning cotton. Joan sought them out. As a matter of fact, as soon as she heard about them, she got on the phone, called the Linders in Arizona, and asked when and where their next workshop was going to be in her area. Their scheduled workshop in Florida had just been canceled, so in three weeks, Joan organized a new workshop just so she would have the Linders at her side as she learned the nuances of cotton spinning. A long and valued friendship with the Linders developed.

Joan's first encounter with spinning on the takli spindle didn't impress her. She'd been spinning wool on a wheel and takli spinning seemed unproductive. By her third class, however, she took up the challenge of spinning cotton on a supported spindle and hasn't stopped since. She loves a challenge, and learning to spin cotton and then teach it to so many was a challenge she was willing to take. Joan loves to see the moment when a spinner who has had the mindset that she couldn't spin cotton finally gets the feel of it, and the fear of cotton instantly dissolves away.

Many things have changed since Joan's early days of cotton spinning. Wheel manufacturers have increased ratios to give spinners more options for spinning short-staple fibers. Ratios of at least 10:1 allow a spinner to spin the shortest cotton fibers because cotton needs a lot of twist to hold together as a yarn. Today's wheels with higher ratios allow for more twist with less effort.

When Joan first learned to spin cotton she was lucky just to find a farmer willing to pull a few handfuls of cotton off his bale. Now there are many varieties of cotton fibers to spin, ranging from the shorter, whiter Acala (upland) Cotton grown in the southern United States to longer-staple, creamy-colored Pima cotton grown in the western United States. Naturally colored cotton in shades of browns and greens is now available thanks to the efforts of Sally Fox of Vreseis Ltd. Fiber preparations available to today's cotton spinner include seed cotton,



A woven jacket Joan made from her handspun cotton.

ginned cotton (seeds removed), sliver (cleaned and carded fibers), and punis (handcarded batt compressed into rolls).

Joan is currently working with farmers in California under the Sustainable Cotton Project (www.sustainablecotton.org), which is growing a variety of cottons labeled Cleaner Cotton and grown without using the most toxic pesticides and herbicides. It is this cotton that Joan is having processed into her varieties of Pima, Acala, and naturally colored Easy to Spin sliver, sold through shops and mail-order vendors. Her Easy to Spin fibers are carefully processed to preserve the cotton's natural crimp, which is so important to successful cotton spinning.

Years of teaching physical education have given

Joan's First-Time Cotton Spinning Tips

1. Adjust your mind to the fact that spinning a short-staple fiber is *not* hard.
2. Make sure you are comfortable with your wheel before spinning cotton.
3. Use a flyer-lead wheel with a ratio of 10:1 or higher.
4. Adjust your wheel so that there is very slight draw-in.
5. Pinch back about 1 inch on the cotton fiber and begin your long draw.
6. Treadle evenly and consistently as you draw back on the cotton fiber.
7. Once the fiber becomes a yarn, add extra twist before allowing it to wind onto your bobbin. (Cotton needs lots of twist to hold together as a yarn.)
8. Sit back, relax, and have fun spinning cotton!



Joan's Deluxe Takli Spinning Kit.
JOE COCA

Joan the experience to present cotton spinning in a clear, concise, and entertaining style that has made her beloved by spinners nationwide. After many years of fine-tuning her teaching methods, she has now self-

produced two DVDs, *Cotton Spinning Made Easy* and *Cotton Spinning with the Takli*.

Joan has called Arizona home since 1958, and living in the Southwest suits her

perfectly. It is a place where she can combine her love of cotton with her love for horses. Horses have always played a special role in her life. As a young girl growing up in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, she had a horse, and today she has a close bond with Cody, an Arabian horse owned by her friend Katie. You'll often find Joan helping with roundup on her daughter Darcy's cattle ranch in

northern Arizona, where her main chore is working as chuckwagon cook. However, she's never too far from cotton, and she spins cotton on her takli whenever she has a free moment.

While cotton spinning is her passion, Joan has also been influential in creating a vibrant spinning and weaving guild in Bisbee, Arizona, where her tireless efforts of procuring a room in the basement of the local Bisbee Community Y for classes and workshops has earned her the recognition of a room named "The Joan Ruane Fiber Arts Studio" in her honor.

Anyone who has taken a class with Joan can vouch for two things: she really loves cotton, and she knows how to teach! Harry and Olive Linder would be very proud that she kept her word. ☘

Irene Laughing Cloud Schmoller, founder and owner of Cotton Clouds, fell in love with cotton spinning during a pre-Convergence (1978) workshop taught by Olive and Harry Linder and has been spinning cotton exclusively ever since.

Southwest Corner

Cotton Spinning with Joan Ruane
www.cottonspinning.com