

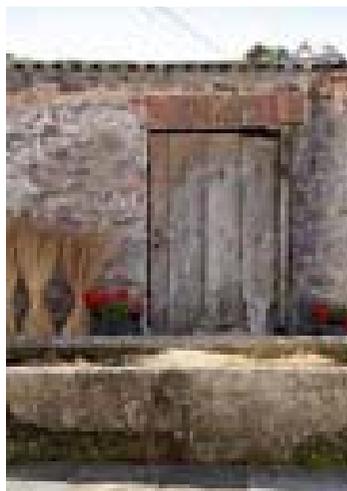


FROM SEED *to* cloth

Devon weaver Susie Gillespie turns her crop of home-grown flax into wonderful woven creations that mix the techniques of the past with a sense of contemporary artistry

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*Y*arn becomes an artist's tool in Susie Gillespie's hands. Watching her work at one of the four large looms inside her Devon studio, shafts of September sunlight streaming through the open doors, it's clear that this is a weaver with a difference. "I don't like the strict, regimented constraints of the formal approach - I'm much more freestyle. I like to see where an idea will take me," she says, while operating the foot pedals and moving the shuttle to and fro. So she pushes down the threads to introduce a bumpy, uneven feel, introducing dense areas as well as holes and gaps that hint at signs of mending and darning. Or she might create raised edges that cast a different colour and lift up strands to form a chevron pattern, ➔



known as twilling, as well as fraying, looping and fringing. "To make the cloth look even rougher, I also tear at it and rub parts with a scrubbing brush, then colour areas with natural paints and white gesso, a type of primer," she says. It might sound extreme but the results are decidedly beautiful – individual textured artworks in soft, subtle shades that display her 20-year fascination with the materials and methods of the past.

Susie's studio provides the perfect place to do this. Surrounded by ancient, gnarled apple trees, laden with fruit in early autumn, it has an idyllic, tranquil feel and only the sound of birdsong and her flock of hens clucking contentedly in the orchard break the silence. At the bottom of the garden, a brook meanders through the fields where flocks of sheep graze. "There's a sense that the landscape hasn't changed for centuries and the atmosphere suits the character of my work," she says.

It was her love of early primitive textiles that led Susie to experiment with hand-spun antique linen and nettle yarns about 15 years ago but, in 2012, she decided to be even more authentic and began growing and spinning her own flax, making her one of only a handful of weavers to do so in this country. "I wanted to go from seed to cloth," she says. "It's incredibly labour-intensive and has taken a lot of experimenting at every stage – I'm learning all the time." She sows her crop in April into a dedicated bed in the orchard that requires near-constant weeding and watering, as well as in a polytunnel and flowerpots lined up in an old stone trough, with the delicate blue

flowers appearing from late June to July. In September, when the golden stems are waist-high and the seed heads have formed, Susie begins the painstaking process of turning her harvest into yarn. First, she pulls the plants up with the roots to ensure the fibres will be as

The process of turning the dried flax into yarn is very labour-intensive

long as possible, then leaves them to dry before removing the seeds with a metal-pronged rippling comb. The bundles will be stored in the studio until she's ready to 'rett' or soak them in a bath of water: "After a week or so, I twist the stems and begin removing the fibres from the woody core," Susie says. This physically demanding task involves using a wooden flax breaker and 'scutching' knife to break it down even more and 'hackling' with a metal comb. Finally, she is left with a handful of fibres that looks rather like a long, cream ponytail, which she hangs from a distaff, or stick, and twists onto her spinning wheel, smoothing them together with a little water. To keep the yarn neat, she winds it into a ball around half a walnut shell, a simple practice favoured by weavers of the past.

Until five years ago she used to do all the weaving in her house but now her timber-framed studio houses the collection of hand looms used for her courses, each one painted white to soften the original orange pine. Small bundles of flax hang on the wooden panelling, while upturned fruit crates on the walls provide storage for small tools. Bags of fibres await spinning, reels of coloured yarn for the cushions she also makes are wound around old bobbins, and wire baskets are filled with balls of spun linen. After she has hand-knotted each thread onto the loom, the creative process she



FROM FAR LEFT
Susie at one of the hand looms in the studio; the simple style of her home offsets one of her woven artworks; yarn ready for weaving; every cushion is unique

enjoys so much can begin, with the mixture of her own hand-spun and vintage linen, Himalayan nettle yarn and, occasionally, silk and raf – a creating a combination that introduces subtly different colours, textures and depth into each piece.

As well as ancient textiles, Susie's work is influenced by her love of old buildings, particularly the patterns in damp and crumbling plaster, the stone and cob walls of traditional Devon barns, the remains of paint on weathered wood, and broken carvings. It was this passion that drew her to work on archeological sites in Brittany and then Oxford in her early 20s, when she also began exploring prehistoric artefacts at the British Museum, including remnants of Coptic textiles dating from 4th and 5th-century Egypt. "I loved the 'clothiness', the rough texture, the way even a tiny fragment still felt alive because of the hours that went into producing it," she recalls. She later went on to study textiles at De Montfort University in Leicester and completed an MA in textile design at Winchester School of Art in 1994. Since then, using hand-spun linen rather than wool has shaped her style. "The irregularities in the yarn give an organic, natural quality that takes me closer to my inspiration," she says.

Susie's woven creations range in size from tiny scraps that she sometimes sews together to large ones as wide as the loom. While her processes and influences are firmly rooted in the past, each one has a decidedly contemporary feel, too – the subdued colours and outline of shapes, perhaps echoing a rustic building, evoke the mood of an abstract painting. Likewise, the collection of wonderful woven cushions, the simplest of which take up to a day to make, which she began producing three years ago epitomises the appeal of modern rustic style with blocks of colour and geometric patterns.

September is a busy time for Susie. Cider apples need to be gathered once they have dropped to the ground and she will also be running more of her woven textile courses, inspiring others to create cloth with character. "Nothing has more beauty for me than material that bears all the hallmarks of having been hand made," she adds. "It tells a story of patience and endeavour, with an individuality that can never be matched by a machine." 🌿

Susie's two-day weaving workshops at her Devon home cost £180, which includes lunch, all materials and the chance to weave your own artwork or cushion, plus tips on how to grow and harvest flax. For more details, visit susiegillespie.com.

