

ANN ARBOR: Crowds weave through vendor booths at Spring Fiber Expo

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By Chris Nelson
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ANN ARBOR — There was no shortage of fiber in Ann Arbor over the weekend as hundreds came out to attend the First Annual Spring Fiber Expo.

The expo, held at the Washtenaw Farm Council Grounds showcased the work of more than 25 vendors from multiple states.

Vendors featured homemade fiber products ranging from raw and dyed fiber materials, to finished clothing and purses ready for purchase. Attendees could also participate in class demonstrations and view the process of shearing fiber-producing animals.

"The fiber I'm dealing with is not something you drink for your stomach or the fiber used in optics," said a chuckling Connie Hydell, the event coordinator for the fiber expo, "It's the fiber from animals and plants."

This is the first year that Hydell has held a fiber expo in the spring.

"It looks like it's been quite a hit," said Hydell. "I walked around and talked to the vendors today and they were pretty happy with the turnout and what they were selling. They've got beautiful, beautiful things. We've had a great turnout with customers."

The Annual Fall Fiber Expo organized by Hydell also has been a success since it first began seven years ago. Hydell says the fall expo usually draws around 2,000 fiber enthusiasts each year to the event.

Raw fiber materials available at the expo were available to purchase for the creation of wool, yarn, fleece, mohair and linen products. Wood was also a material used for producing homemade baskets and spindles sold by vendors.

Products on display by vendors included everything from hand-dyed yarn to stuffed animals resembling alpacas made of alpaca fiber. Wool sweaters, knit caps, and fleece clothing were also for sale. Some vendors made yarn using spinning wheels right at their booths.

Many of the products featured at the expo were made in the state of Michigan.

Debra Youngs, the owner of artUwear, based in Schoolcraft, was a vendor at the expo. Youngs marketed a storage bobbin she and her husband designed called 'Bobbins Up.'

"I have produced a storage bobbin for the spinning wheel, so that you can transfer yarn from your wooden bobbin to a plastic bobbin," said Youngs on March 9. "It's made right here in Michigan."

Youngs also was selling a line of patterns that she created.

"I like the creativity of working with fiber. It gives you so many options for dyeing different textures and being able to produce something that's totally unique and your own," she said.

Live animals have always been a part of the fiber expos. Three Alpacas named Dynamite, Achilles, and Hershey Kiss were brought to the expo by Zodiac Ranch, based in Milford.

Sheering demonstrations showed how fleeces are removed from animals like Romney sheep and Angora rabbits.

Wiley Woolies of Manchester had several Angora rabbits and Angora wool mittens hats, and scarves for sale.

The expo featured interactive class workshops that attendees could join to learn techniques like rug hooking, basket weaving and spinning with a drop spindle.

Suzanne Pufpaff, the owner of Pufpaff's Fiber Processing LLC, based in Nashville, has been a vendor at the fiber expos since they first began in 2006. This year, Pufpaff held classroom demonstrations on creating striped yarn from solid colored rovings with a spinning wheel.

Pufpaff explained, "The spinning wheel is essentially what puts the twist and stores the fibers or the thread to be used to ply later."

Pufpaff also noted that the artistry is in the hands. "That's where the design work, the technique, and the actual knowledge needs to be."

Hydel said that even she has learned new tricks of the trade from the fiber expos she created. She wore her own handmade leg warmers to the expo on Saturday, made from sheep's wool and hair from one of her dogs.

"You can't beat wool for warmth," said Hydel. "As far as the sustainability of the products, wool is said to last forever."

Hydel says she thinks her favorite part of the expo is the people.

"Everybody is just happy. It's a happy crowd," said Hydel.

More than 35 vendors are already registered for the Seventh Annual Fall Fiber Expo, scheduled to take place the weekend of Oct. 26 to 27.

The Washtenaw Farm Council Grounds are located at 5055 Ann Arbor-Saline Road.

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