

NEEDLE IT



Woolly Bullies

Sculpt wool into felted fruits and vegetables (or anything imaginable!). BY BROOKELYNN MORRIS

An unusual act of crafty repurposing, needle felting is the art of sculpting wool with a barbed needle. The specialty needle was adapted for art from its original use in industrial and automotive machinery. Needle-felting machines, which can hold 250,000 needles, are used to manufacture air bags, oil and fuel filters, and non-woven upholstery. In the 1980s, crafters began using the needles manually to make art. As a medium, carded-wool batting can be manipulated into any shape. Infinite varieties and colors of wool are available to make flowers, dinosaurs, cats, dogs, robots, jewelry, or any sculpture. The supplies are inexpensive, and the techniques are simple and fun.



For specs and tips on each of the fabulous fruits and vegetables shown in this issue, check out craftzine.com/02/needle_felt.

Materials

Foam that is flat and slightly firm, to use as a work surface.

Felting needles are triangular or star-shaped, covered with fierce barbs, and available in different gauges. You need only one for most projects, yet dedicated felters use multiple gauges and shapes.

Carded-wool batting Generally, coarse fibers are more easily felted than silky ones. The movement of the felting needle creates very dense material — 2 handfuls of carded wool can condense into a flower the size of a silver dollar.

To obtain your supplies:

1. Scavenge! Use an old sponge or a scrap of foam as your work surface. A stiff-bristle brush with bristles facing straight up can be used. Find a sheep to shear, then card and dye its wool with plant dyes or Kool-Aid. The needles will most likely be purchased new.

2. Buy a kit. Many include everything you need to begin your first project.

WARNING: Prevent felting injury! Fingers can be poked and punctured — watch the needle and work slowly.



1. Gather wool and begin needling one side.

Gather wool together and hold it between two fingers. Push into the wool batting with the felting needle. If you have multiple gauged needles, begin with the smallest gauge (which is the largest size).

The wool easily condenses beneath the point. Gentle pressure will create all the friction necessary for the fibers to entangle. The needle ought to enter the object at a ¼" to ½" depth. It should not be pushed deep into the foam. Push the needle into the wool again and again; not very many strokes are needed to give shapeless batting a new form.

2. As it takes shape, needle the reverse and the sides.

To refine your object, gently lift and needle the other side. If fibers become embedded into work surface, pull gently until wool is freed. Rotate spherical objects frequently. Visualize a center and turn the felt every few stabs to create dimension and shape.

3. Work the wool to make edges and curves.

The wool follows the directional force of the needle. Alternating the angles at which the needle enters the wool will make edges and curves. Any errors can simply be repaired with more wool and more needling; it is also easy to add new colors in this way. Work the project with needles, hands, and fingers until the desired density has been achieved.

4. Attach multiple pieces.

When making an object with multiple pieces, leave the sides that will be bonded together slightly rough. Pierce the parts into each other, being sure that the barbs of the needle entangle the fibers of both pieces. To prevent distortion, use greater pressure but fewer strokes. A large-gauge, star-shaped needle is useful for attaching other colors and parts.

5. Embellish.

Once the shape has been created, any kind of detail or color can be applied. These fiber sculptures can easily be sewn with beads, sequins, and embroidery thread.

Brookelynn Morris is just like you — she loves to hula-hoop, longboard, and make flower arrangements. Her very fine husband, Nat, uses his photography skills to make all of her projects look very, very good.

Photograph (this page) by Thayer Allyson Gowdy; photography (opposite page) by Nat Wilson-Heckathorn

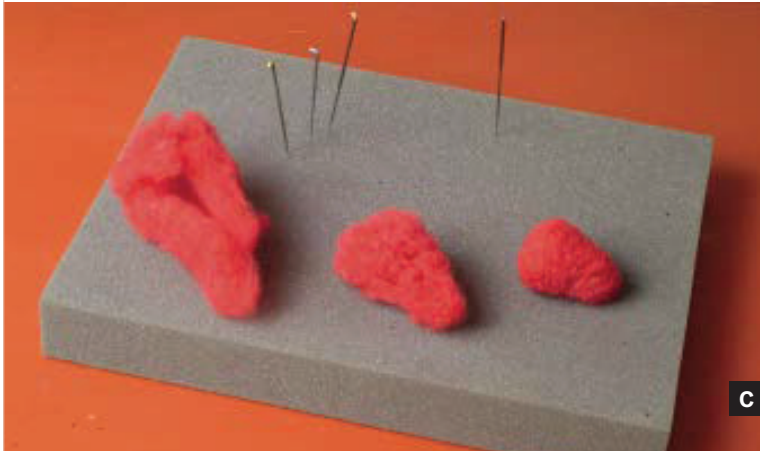


A



B

+ NEEDLE IT: FELTED FRUIT



C



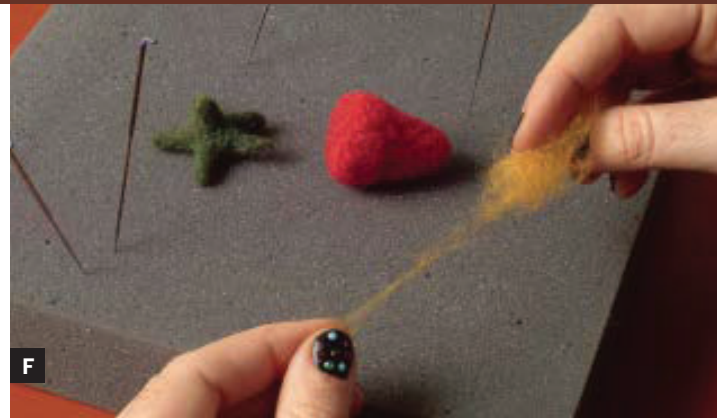
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Fig. A: This needle is triangular with sharp barbs along its edges. Fig. B: To begin, gather the wool into a mass that suggests the ultimate shape of the sculpture. Fig. C: From fluffy and light to dense and firm, change in the batting

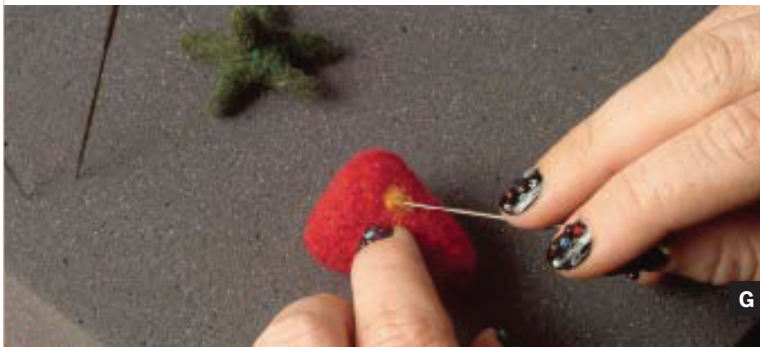
happens quickly. Fig. D: Frequently and gently, pull the fibers to untangle the project from the foam. Fig. E: Pinch and hold the wool to make edges. Twist it in your fingers, and needle along the very edge to give good definition to



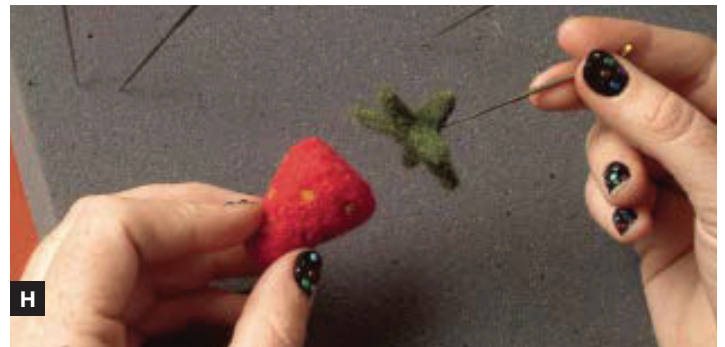
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F



G



H

small details. Fig. F: To make the seeds for this fruit, use the smallest amount of fibers. A little goes a long way. Fig. G: When adding surface colors be sure to use a light touch. A star-shaped needle is the tool of choice.

Fig. H: Pieces can be joined together easily, especially if the edges that meet are left a bit rough. Stab right through the center of both pieces. Voilà!