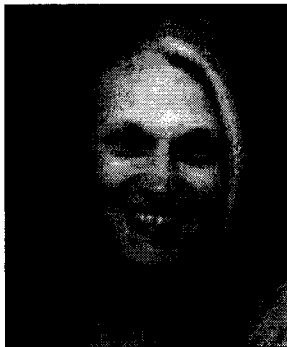




## Who Decides How Yarn is Packaged?

Ever wonder why some yarn is in hanks, other on balls? We asked industry professionals for their viewpoints.



**Susan Levin**  
- *Knit One*  
*Crochet Two*

**K**nit One, Crochet Too Yarns are relatively new so we try to offer unique products and

support our yarn with a selection of patterns so the yarns may be used in a variety of ways. Because of this we use yarns from many different sources and sometimes we use them in ways commercial spinners never thought of.

First, let me say that hand knitting yarn is a very small percentage of what most commercial spinners make. The biggest volume for almost all spinners is the ready-to wear market and that yarn is sold on cones that are at least 2-5 pounds or even larger. As the market for hand knitting yarn has shrunk, so has the equipment available for finishing it. Very little new equipment for hand knitting yarn is being made, but when it is made, it is outrageously expensive. Most mills use the equipment they have and then cannibalize older equipment as needed to make repairs. Innovation for a small part of their business does not seem high on their list.

Knit One, Crochet Too yarn comes from a variety of mills and countries so each one is a bit of a different story. Some yarn is purchased from commercial spinners in the US, Italy, Peru and Canada and is balled based on the equipment the mill has. If we specified we wanted different size balls from the type they normally run, we would have to purchase huge quantities to get them to change the put-up.

Most painted yarn is skein dyed. Ours is skein dyed in large hanks. We purchase the undyed yarn from three different sources either on hanks or cones and then have it re-hanked so

all the yarn hanks are uniform sizes. After it is dyed, it has to be re-coned (or re-hanked) so it fits on our winding machines which will only take up to 3 lb hanks with about a 36" diameter or about 3 lb cones. Our custom made winding machines then wind down to the smaller hanks we sell. We also purchase yarn that is made for the ready-to-wear industry on jumbo cones and then wind down to manageable sizes in our warehouse.

We have looked and looked for a ball winding machine and have been told by several textile brokers that they simply aren't available in the U.S. any more. The most recent find was one in Austria with 20 heads (winds 20 cones at a time) for \$45,000! Plus we get to pay the shipping. That is a huge machine. Not in my budget or in my warehouse plans. Our custom-made hanking machines were made by my husband and computerized by Gloria's son-in-law, both very clever guys.

As to how much skeins weigh, we usually go with 25, 50 or 100 gram skeins and adjust the price accordingly since we feel that makes apple to apple comparisons easier. Other people prefer to go for the price point and adjust the yardage. Other companies do it based on the equipment available, or any other method that suits their needs. Sometimes put-up is based on what the end use will be, i.e. a kit or design that uses a certain number of balls.

We also try to think of projects that use multiple yarns and smaller quantities so that we can get people to try several of our yarns. Our experience has been that if we have too high a retail on an individual skein, people may be hesitant to try it, so we try to adjust the yardage to fit a reasonable price point and the 25, 50 100 gram number.



**Warren Wheelock - President, Berroco, Inc.**

Berroco is one of the few yarn companies who package some of our products ourselves. And, since we have been in business for decades, we have had the opportunity to experiment and watch consumers tastes change.

**Pull Skeins:** Back in the 70's and 80's, we had all our yarns packaged onto "pull skeins", that is, the log type skeins and packaged into boxes. However, as yarns became more fashionable, customers complained that our pull skeins looked too much like economy yarn putups. As a result, we started to phase out our log style pull skeins and purchased balling equipment. In some ways, it was a pity since the pull skeins can be efficiently produced, and yes, they "pull" from the center of the skein! The pull skein is very well suited for wools and acrylics and a disaster for slippery yarns such as cottons, and rayons.

**Balls:** The Europeans favor this putup. And since there are so many European yarns distributed by US wholesalers, one finds this putup very common even in US shops. There are specialized balling machines made for the production of hand knitting balls. These machines are very efficient since they provide automatic winding, doffing, thread cutting and even labeling. The downside is these machines can be very pricey, new can range up to \$65,000. A common complaint is that the labels fall off. This is not a fault with the ball itself, but rather with the design of the label. Some labels have the "arrow shape" at one (or two) ends of the label. These arrows should be secured tightly into the ball openings. If the "arrow shape" is too small, labels will easily fall out.

We have learned our own lessons from our own SensuWool and Smart Cotton lines. Since they are both highly twisted yarns, it was very difficult to design a label that would hold the ball together. After one year of using "arrow" style labels, we later changed to labels which wrap around the "waist" of the ball and are then tightly secured with tape. In order to convert, we threw into the trash around 15,000 labels! Regardless of the labeling, most balls will not stack and end up rolling around within the yarn bin.

When it comes to slippery yarns, these same machines are used. However, in order to keep the yarn from falling apart, the yarn is sometimes wound onto paper tubes (like crochet cotton) or foam. Although the paper tube core keeps the ball stable, the finished ball can resemble "kite string" and doesn't allow the softness of the yarn to come through.

**Twist Hanks:** In addition to balls, we also produce 50gm twist hanks. Since there is no single machine which will make such a putup, this packaging requires two separate steps. The first step is to make the circular hank (usually done on "reeler"). The second operation is to add "twist" to the hank and then pull one end of the skein through the opposite end, not to mention the "tie offs", stamping of labels, stapling/taping of labels and bagging. The pro's are that the putup is very stable, lays nicely on the shelf and the

twist hank is aesthetically attractive. The con is that it is very slow to produce, labor intensive and requires that the consumer (or shop owner!) wind into balls before knitting.

**Boxes vs Bags:** As regarding boxes, the cost of cardboard went up dramatically back in the 80's as compared with the cost of plastic bags. Also, when using cardboard boxes, the boxes must also be labeled on the outside (another additional cost). Boxes also are significantly more expensive to ship to the shop owner. However, the boxes stack much better and "protect" the yarn better. On the whole, plastic bags provide a more commercial solution. Now, almost all suppliers ship balls in bags with the exception of boxes of angora and cashmere.



**Uyvonne Bigham - Design Director  
Plymouth Yarn Co.**

I will try to the best of my knowledge to answer your question, "who decides the yarn put-up?". The yarn spinner makes the decision in most cases to put the yarn up in 50 gram or 100 gram balls or skeins. Here at Plymouth we only import yarns, so we rarely have any input into whether the yarn is put up as a ball or a skein. Most yarns that we import are already skeined or made into balls and either boxed or put into plastic bags.

Occasionally we have had to make a decision as to whether to make a yarn available in a ball or a skein. We once had our Galway as a skeined yarn and were told by many shop owners that they would prefer it to be in a neat ball. Well, we put the yarn into a ball so that it would take up less shelf space and we got a number of irate shop owners who hated our new balls and wanted us to go back to the skein. We sent out a questionnaire to a number of shop to find their preference and found it to be about 50-50 for and against. So we settled on leaving Plymouth Galway in balls.

With the jumbo yarns that are making the scene now, many are coming in larger than 100 gram balls or skeins. We recently had a new merino come in that is put up in 200 gram skeins because the yardage is low. It wouldn't make sense to make this yarn in 50 gram balls because it takes one skein to make just about any project and it is a space dyed yarn to boot. Joining ends would be too stressful.

Personally, from the business end, I think that yarn in a ball is easier to manage on shelf space. Skeined yarn on the other hand takes up more space but has a beautiful presentation. Higher end yarns, like handpainted and space dyed, are presented better in the skein.

Another consideration of the yarn companies and spinners is the price point. If we have a 50 gram ball selling for say \$10.00 versus a 100 gram skein selling for \$20.00 the consumer sees the 50 gram ball as more of a bargain or do able price range. Also the smaller put up allows the consumer to have less waste when making a project, i.e., if a project takes 525 grams and the put up is 100 grams the consumer must buy 6 skeins and has 75 grams of yarn remaining after she finishes

the project. If the put up is only 50 grams she buys 11 skeins and has only 25 grams remaining after she finishes the project.



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**Cheryl Schaefer  
 Schaefer Yarns**

Since Schaefer Yarns are hand dyers, I suspect the way we make a decision about put up is quite different than the large manufacturers, but for what it's worth, we try to utilize the same packaging for all our yarns to save money. Our minimum run for the plastic bags

we use, for example, is 10,000 pieces, so we don't want to have more than one type. The skein size has to fit. Also, for us, handling small put ups is extremely time consuming. The larger the skein, the less handling. Originally, we put a whole garment's worth into one skein or two. Most of the stores accepted the idea, and, indeed, there were no leftover balls to fuss with, but some customers wanted to use the yarn for smaller projects, etc., so we began to offer smaller put ups, too. Our business for children's items, accessories, etc. has increased because of the change, but so, too, have our production costs.

It seems to me that the size of the put up for most yarn is kept small to increase versatility. Why a company chooses 50 gr or 100 gr, etc., may have nothing to do with knitting though, but rather with the psychology of paying less per "ball". It's just like getting less candy in a candy bar or less coffee in a can. You get less, but you pay less per item and the latter seems to take less getting used to for the consumer. How many people ask how much yardage they are getting for their \$5.95 per ball? Or do they just want to know how many it takes?

Yarn making equipment varies considerably from place to place. As for making skeins or balls, the machinery a company has determines which is used. Since a mill usually creates both these packaging styles from cones, I can't see one costing a manufacturer much less than the other, although tying is not required for a ball. Larger put ups do cost less: less tying, fewer labels, and less handling. And while some of the larger companies have their own mills, some don't; some buy a few yarns from another source while manufacturing some yarns in house; some are distributors for a single entity.

Yarn is manufactured world wide, and you can't expect a uniform standard. A small company such as Schaefer Yarns does not have the time or people power to overcome the problems inherent in purchasing internationally and will often have to work through an American representative for a foreign source. Problems with the yarn, such as put up, can be exacerbated dealing with a "middle man," only adding to differences from one yarn to another. I'm afraid that little in the yarn industry is straightforward and by the time yarn reaches the end user, many factors have contributed to the myriad variations one sees in the yarn stores.

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