

Fabric Quality and Selection Tips

Fabric Quality

Award winning quilts combine excellent workmanship, eye-catching color, intriguing patterns and quality materials. Utility quilts, created to stand up against the wear and tear of frequent use, combine many of the same elements. Changes in one or more of these elements, such as color, result in very different appearing quilt tops as evidenced by the parade of quilts during “Show and Tell” at the closing of each Quilt and Craft at Camp Lebanon. For example, every quilt in the beginner class is amazingly different, even though the same pattern is used.

Those of us who have been quilting for a while can see a marked difference between our first quilts and our current projects. Our skills have improved and we have more techniques “under our belts”. Perhaps we have become more daring with use of color or have progressed from the foundational 9-patch to a Mariner’s Compass or intricate applique. Many of us are also long past the hard swallow we took when we first saw the price per yard on all those wonderful fabric bolts lined up on quilt shop shelves. We have learned to appreciate what those dollars buy. As we’ve learned, price does not always tell the story on quality. Lower priced fabrics are not always lower quality. The manufacturer may have offered a discount, the buyer may have purchased in quantity, the quilt shop may have a fabric sale or offered some selections at a lower price to attract customers.

But fabric quality is affected by several factors directly linked to how it was manufactured:

a) Construction

Thread count is the number of yarns per linear inch in the warp (lengthwise weave) and the weft or filling (crosswise weave). Preferred thread count for quilting cotton is 60” x 60”, 68” x 68” or 78” x 78”. Some cotton fabrics have different thread counts per linear inch lengthwise and crosswise. It can be very difficult if not impossible to get good results when machine or hand quilting these fabrics.

b) Greige Goods

Greige goods refers to the unfinished cloth on which fabric is printed. There are many different grades and one manufacturer may produce several different grades. A fine quality cloth has a clear, clean smooth surface without any nubs or slubs. (A nub is a little round ball of dead cotton which sits on the surface of a fabric while a slub is an elongated, uneven, hanging thread that pops out of the fabric weave.) The more nubs and slubs found, the lower the quality of greige goods. Compare fabrics experienced quilters love to work with from manufacturers such as Hoffman, Northcott Silks, or Moda to 100% cottons you commonly find at chain or discount stores. You will be able to see and feel the difference.

c) Dyes

Fiber reactive dyes are often considered the best for dark colors because they penetrate the yarns in the fabric rather than just sitting on the surface of the cloth. Pigment dye is often considered the best for lighter colors. Sometimes manufacturers allow a layer of dye to sit on top of the fabric to give it richer looking colors on the bolt. You will often experience challenges with dyes “running” when washing these fabrics. Generally, a continuous dye process in which all the fabric goes through the same dye bath is better than batch dyeing unless you want the difference in color that may be visible from one printing run to the next. The differences between batches can be considered a plus when working with hand dyed fabrics.

d) Fabric Preparation

Fabrics that have been mercerized before being printed are recommended. Mercerization is a process in which caustic soda is used to eliminate any imperfections found on greige goods. The mercerization process cleans the cloth, giving it a smoother surface. It also opens up the yarns so the fabric can accept dyes more readily, achieving a better bloom of color.

e) Design

Some marvelous designers who love (or at least understand) quilting have emerged as the quilting phenomenon continues to explode. Reputable fabric designers are likely to work only with manufacturers producing high quality quilt fabric. Sometimes our quilts need pieces of “ugly” fabric to bring them life and color, but you will enjoy the overall quilting experience much more if you are generally working with fabrics you find innovative and appealing.

While you can find marvelous buys at chain stores and discount outlets, you will need to approach your shopping with a practiced eye to discern the quality of the fabric. Quilt shops offer advantages, especially for beginning quilters, in that the owners, managers and employees are almost always experienced quilters and are committed to offering quality products. They understand the effort that goes into creating a quilt. They have observed or experienced the frustrations of running dyes, and disintegrating fabrics. They want your first quilting experiences to be positive.

And so do the instructors at Camp Lebanon. We recommend 100% quality cotton for beginners. It is relatively easy to work with, a wide range of choices in color and pattern is readily available, and the finished results are pleasing. Buying quality fabric helps reduce frustrations and allows you to concentrate on learning foundational quilting skills.

As you progress in your skills, you may want to experiment with other fabrics. Perhaps you are yearning to make a memory quilt from used clothes, try wool felt applique, use a bit of metallic as an accent, collect velvets for a crazy patch, tackle stretchy flannels, or make a one-of-a-kind quilted vest from a piece of upholstery fabric. You will be able to judge when you have the patience and skill to work with fabrics that present challenges. There are indeed times to venture beyond the usual. As you gain experience, you will know when that bargain basement length of fabric is just the thing for that tied quilt you’re making to be

tossed in the trunk of your car during our Minnesota winters. You will be able to better judge when that fun fabric at the discount store is appropriate for the comfort quilt that will be drug around by a busy toddler. With the final product in mind, buy the best materials your budget can manage. And have fun shopping!

Source: Choosing Quality Quilting Fabric by Demetria Zahoudanis, Fabric Showcase Special (Supplement to Traditional Quiltworks and Quilting Today, 1998

Fabric Selection Hints

As you read this information, please keep in mind that this is a BRIEF overview of fabric selection suggestions. There are many books that more thoroughly address fabric selection and quilt shops are more than happy to help you. These are hints that the Camp Lebanon quilt instructors hope will help you as you select fabric designs for your quilt.

As you select your fabric, keep in mind the purpose, room, or where you will be using the quilt. If you have a contemporary home, you may want to select solid fabrics or geometric patterns. If you have country decorating, look at small calico prints. If you prefer a Victorian look, think about using a large scale floral print or one of the more elegant fabrics with a metallic accent. Or you may want to choose a fabric just because you fell in love with it! Being happy with your fabric selection will ensure a pleasant quilting experience and satisfying results.

General Selection Guidelines

When selecting fabric there are two general guidelines: (1) look for fabrics with differing light and dark contrasts and (2) look for fabrics with different print sizes. By following these two general guidelines your quilt will have contrast versus blending together and looking like one piece of fabric.

“Nearly solid” fabrics work very well within a quilt. A “nearly solid” is a fabric which appears solid when you look at it from a distance - you can barely see the pattern from a distance. For instance a pin dot, a tone on tone print, or a small print that is mostly one color.

Remember that light and dark are relative terms. The lighter your light fabric is, the wider the range of choices for the dark fabric. If you choose to use white you can choose almost any other fabrics for the medium and/or dark colors and have the contrast you need. The same idea applies if you choose a very dark fabric such as black or navy. You then have almost unlimited options in choosing medium and/or light fabrics and still maintain the desired contrast.

Working with Large Prints...

If you fall in love with a large multicolor print fabric, there are ways to use these too. Remember that when you cut such a fabric up into little pieces you lose much of the effect. Often the color even seems to be less intense or lighter. You will probably want to use this fabric where you will have the largest pieces in your quilt. For additional colors, choose from the colors in the print, but be sure it will contrast well with the overall print. You might choose the background color from the print if it is much lighter or much darker than the rest of the design and if it is not too predominant in the print fabric.

You do not want your fabrics to blend together. Remember you are looking for contrast. Another way to accomplish this is to choose a color that is in the print but is not one of the most obvious colors in the design. This second fabric should be a solid or “nearly solid” so that the quilt does not become too “busy”. When you think you have a good combination, stack the bolts of fabric so that all you see are the edges of the bolts (where the fabric wraps around the bolt.). Stand back and take another look. Looking at this smaller area of fabric will give you a better idea of how the fabrics will look in the quilt. Squint as you look at them or take off your glasses. If the fabrics seem to blend into each other when you do this, you probably need more of a contrast.

Another possibility for using a large print is to use it only in a border. If you add a wide border, you can show off a large print to its full advantage. Your fabric selection for the main part of the quilt should take this into consideration. You may want to stay away from larger prints so it does not fight with the border. Smaller prints and/or “nearly solid” fabrics would work well. You might pick the background color and the most dominant colors in the pattern. Again, stack all bolts and stand back to get a better look at your choices. Experiment with some different combinations that are inspired by your “theme fabric”.

Flannels

The use of flannel in quilts is very popular today. There are some lovely flannel fabrics in the quilt shops. However, please remember that flannel material is not necessarily all alike! Some will stretch. Flannel fabric is not encouraged for those new to quilting. Those more experienced should be very careful in their selections.

Stripes, diagonal prints, directional designs...

Fabrics with stripes, diagonal prints, directional designs (ones that have a definite top and bottom), and large plaids or checks (small plaids or checks could be okay) present unique challenges when incorporating them into a quilt. While these fabrics provide interesting and attractive results, working with the design can be difficult. Those fairly new to quilting should refrain from using them until they feel comfortable with the basic quilting techniques.

Again, please keep in mind that these are merely suggestions as you begin your fabric selection. Don't be afraid to experiment with some combinations that are a little bit out of your comfort zone. You may just create a masterpiece!