

Mad About Plaid

by Maddy Cranley

In March, thoughts turn to the wearing o' the green for St. Patrick's Day, but this year one might consider the wearing o' the tartan - the St. Patrick tartan, that is. Since these plaid fabrics are most often associated with their Scottish origins, they may not appear to be appropriate dress for a celebration in honor of the patron saint of Ireland, but the St. Patrick tartan is just one of many available Irish tartans. As well there are Canadian tartans, New Zealand tartans, American tartans and numerous others. A tartan is a plaid textile design consisting of stripes of varying width and color, patterned to designate a distinctive clan or region. Genuine tartan status is awarded by the Scottish Tartans Society and there are presently over two and a half thousand tartans listed in the Register of All Publicly Known Tartans. These designs have been developed not only in Scotland but in all parts of the world and new ones are still being created. Whereas Scottish tartans for the most part are identified with certain clans and families, many of the Irish tartans are linked to a particular County in Ireland. In Canada, each of the provinces has an official tartan and certain branches of the American Armed Forces display a distinct plaid design in some aspects of their uniform.

According to Blair Urquhart in *Identifying Tartans* (The Apple Press, London), it is hard to determine when the idea of a clan tartan emerged in the Scottish Highlands, but it is generally accepted that it was towards the end of the 18th century. Prior to this, it is thought that members of any small community would logically wear the cloth produced by the local weaver in quantities that would limit variety of the pattern. On the occasion when these citizens were called upon to defend their community in war, it made sense that many of them would be dressed the same. There was a period in Scottish history after the rebellious Battle of Culloden, when the manufacture of tartans was curtailed for over 50 years. It wasn't until 1782 that this ban on Highland dress was repealed. The task of restoring the spirit and culture of the Highlands was undertaken by newly-formed Highland Societies in London and Edinburgh. Royal patronage of these groups ensued, culminating years later in Queen Victoria's "passion for all things Scottish".

Tradition dictates that these plaids are to be woven using a strict formula. Thread colors are used in equal proportion to one another. No more than two colors can be mixed at one time and no two unmixed colors can appear along side each other but must join point to point on the diagonal. Symmetrical "setts" (order of colors) contain two pivots; the points where the sequence of stripes, starting at the pivot, can be seen to be identical in four directions, North, South, East and West. The two pivots are connected along the diagonal by plain squares, each of a single colour. The full sett is the sequence of colours read from right to left, turned about the pivot, and repeated left to right. It is usually between 5 and 7 inches in width to accommodate the kilting (pleats). There are also symmetrical tartans that can be recorded as a half sett and asymmetrical setts that have no true pivots.

Knitting a tartan plaid need not be difficult as the simplest tartan design involves only two colors. An example of a two-color tartan is the Rob Roy, a simple black and red check. If you wish to knit a specific tartan, you can research a family name or its origins on several web sites that provide an index of available tartans. At [House of Tartan](#), a large color image of many tartans can be accessed. [Scotchcorner](#) offers a Tartan Finder, which can assist you in finding a clan association or the suitable tartan connected to a family name. The House of Tartan even offers a software package that generates tartan images in real time from a database of over two thousand patterns. This site is used by retailers, manufacturers and individuals in every country of the world for all inquiries about wholesale and retail availability of tartan fabrics and products.

When knitting your tartan, the horizontal stripes are easily managed in stocking stitch and the vertical lines of the plaid can be added in Swiss darning (duplicate stitch). One excellent

source for knitting tartan designs is the Mon Tricot Knitting Encyclopedia 1500 Patterns. This handy stitch reference offers a selection of eight tartan patterns. The knitting charts for these tartan patterns could also act as a guide when setting up a tartan knitting sequence for any other clan or county tartan (with due consideration to copyright restrictions, if so stated).

The plaid need not be knit for the entire garment. A pocket or collar, perhaps a sweater yoke or wide stripe of tartan would look attractive. To complete your outfit, contact [Tartanweb](#) for guidance in wrapping your kilt while providing a choice of sporrans and clan badges to help you celebrate the holiday in authentic style.

Maddy Cranley is a professional knitwear designer, who has created exclusive designs for knitting and craft magazines, authored and published three books on the subject of creating felt garments and projects from handknitting, and produces an ever-growing line of maddy laine handknitting patterns. For additional information, see <http://www.maddycraft.com>

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