

Tools of the Trade

by Maddy Cranley

Knitting in its simplest form is often described as the looping of a string around two sticks. When faced with multi-color patterning, intricate stitches or complex graphs, this seemingly easy craft becomes a more complex activity that can benefit from an innovative tool or two. Right from the start when the ideas for a new knitting project abound, there are aids to guide you in choices of yarn and color. Color wheels and color selectors, using proven principles of color theory, can steer you through establishing a pleasing color combination of two or many colors. Even though you may pick the perfect geranium pink to match that perfect leaf green, you still must find commercially available yarns of compatible weights in those very colors. Many yarn retailers offer, at a reasonable cost, sample cards of available yarns in their full color range. Much like selecting paint chips at the hardware store, you are able to see at a glance what colors are available in a particular yarn and how they interact with other colors of that yarn type. These swample cards also allow you to judge the compatibility to the ideal colors worked out in a theoretical selection process.

The screwdrivers and wrenches of knitting, the needles, though basic in shape, appear in a variety of materials. Wood and plastic offer comfort to tired hands, metal promises speed. A luxury class of needles fashioned from ebony or rosewood are advertised as hewn from the remains of prized woods used in the manufacture of musical instruments. These needles should make your stitches sing. There is also the "heritage" needle collection of which mine is labelled due to many being borrowed from my mother's knitting basket and never returned. A "classic" collection will likely contain a hodgepodge of needles gathered over the years as in mine, which range from a chipped orange metal No. 4's to green plastic No. 8's. It's an odd grouping of materials and colors but favorites are easily recognizable when a certain knitting job comes to mind.

Now any good craft project whether made from wood or wool is only worth its weight when measurements are accurate and consistent. To knitters, the correct gauge must be achieved or every measurement throughout the project will become skewed. With numerous devices available to help accurately measure those all-important numbers of stitches and rows, there is absolutely no excuse for having the wrong gauge. A square gauge frame will force you to line up your knitting with the stitches at right angles to the rows, leaving you to count the numbers between the borders of the frame. Transparent stitch templates will tell you nothing but the truth as you try to match the drawing of the desired stitch gauge to the stitches of your knitted sample. A good tape measure, plastic or cloth, retractable or not, is essential to measure those lengths and widths once you start knitting.

To see those stitches clearly, use a magnifier lamp clamped to your favorite chair or stood behind the sofa. Try a pair of magnifying flip-up lenses to increase your staying power when working with intricate stitches and dark colors. Don't forget to prop up that book or pattern on a bookstand to keep your charts and graphs front and center. A line magnifier placed over the chart on a magnetic board will eliminate a lot of twisting and turning in your seat as you lean to squint at those lines. Once you have found your place there are gadgets to keep it. Stitch markers and row counters mark the spot and giant safety pins put stitches on hold.

A collection of tools needs a toolbox. Needles should be organized in needle cases, one for the straights and another for circulars, small boxes or bags for the bits and pieces such as stitch markers and measuring devices, and a great big bag or basket to keep it all handy and neat. Last thing, finding the time to knit!

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>

