

A beginner's guide to... patchwork and quilting

Patchwork and quilting are often mentioned in the same breath but they are two very different techniques.

Patchwork is the art of sewing together pieces of fabric to form a pattern or block. When enough blocks have been made, they can be sewn together to form a quilt top.

Quilting is the sewing together of the three layers that make up a quilt - the top, the central wadding, and the backing. Stitches can be utilitarian - basic stab stitch - or worked in delicate patterns.

What you need

The basic kit is a rotary cutter, self-healing mat and a clear acrylic quilting ruler measuring 6.5 x 24in. Creative Grids. A mechanical pencil is useful as it has very fine lead and can be used to mark sewing lines and seam allowances.

Fabric

The beauty of quilting is that you can use up odds and ends of fabric, recycle your old clothes and create something beautiful and unique in the process. Cotton is best as it washes and wears well. Many fabric shops sell 'fat quarters', (a selection of fabrics cut into quarter-metre squares), which are ideal for patchwork.

Using a rotary cutter

The key to successful patchwork lies in cutting your fabric accurately, and the best way to do this is with a rotary cutter. Fold your fabric, press it, and line up the pressed edge on your mat. Place your quilting ruler over the fabric, line it up on the mat and, holding it down firmly, move the rotary cutter away from you to trim the right-hand edge. Turn the board around without moving the fabric and cut your shape from left to right to avoid wastage. When you get more experienced, you'll be able to cut through several layers of fabric at a time. Practise on calico to begin with and always press your fabric first. You can find videos online that demonstrate the correct technique.

Sewing together

You can sew patchwork pieces together by hand or machine with a quarter-inch seam allowance. Press the seams open. When sewing by machine, always use a new needle for each project - number 80 is a good size. Set the stitch length to 2.5 or 3. Sew with the two pieces of fabric right sides together, with the edges travelling just under the edge of the right-hand side of the presser foot. Most good sewing machines now have a quarter-inch patchwork foot.

Quilting

Quilting is usually done by hand. To get started, make a practice sandwich of your three layers. Place a piece of cotton fabric on a flat surface and stick down with masking tape so that the fabric is taut. Load some fine cotton wadding onto the top of

the backing, and smooth out so there are no wrinkles or tucks. Put your top fabric, on which you have marked a quilt design (with a mechanical pencil or tailor's chalk), over the wadding. Tack all three layers into place using rows of stitches. When tacked, remove the masking tape and practise your quilt stitches - it doesn't matter how large they are, as long as they are regular. You will find your own rhythm, whether it's stitch by stitch or two or three at a time. It helps to use a thimble on the finger underneath the work and one on the finger pushing the needle through.

Use good-quality quilting thread, which is coated with a finish that makes the thread glide through the fabric. Use short lengths of thread - approx 15 inches - and a quilting needle or sharp, which has a round eye and is short and strong. Pull beginning and end knots through the top and bottom layers into the wadding.

Further information

The best way to learn patchwork and quilting is by going to a class or workshop