

# Let's Talk Thread

## Which Threads Are Best for Quilting and Patchwork?

Walk into a quilt shop or explore quilting and piecing threads online and you'll find that the choices seem endless. Thousands of thread colors are just the beginning, and possibly the easiest aspect of choosing threads. Beyond that, you'll find threads designed for many different tasks.

- Threads that work best for sewing patchwork are often not labeled for that purpose, making selection a bit difficult.
- Hand quilting threads have characteristics that make them unsuitable for [machine quilting](#).
- Threads designed for machine embroidery and other decorative techniques are varied and are often not a good choice for sewing patchwork.

I hope this guide to quilting threads will help you wade through the maze of threads that quilters use most often.



## Cotton and Polyester Sewing Threads

**Cotton thread** is created by spinning cotton fibers together, and then pulling and twisting a narrow strand of yarn away from the mass. Individual strands of the narrow yarn, each called a *ply*, can be twisted together to create a stronger thread.

**Polyester**, a synthetic product, can be spun together in a similar way to create threads that look like cotton, but have more stretch. Polyester can also be drawn out into long, continuous-filament threads. Polyester thread may, over time, cut through cotton fabric, and create a need for quilt repair. It generally takes many years for the damage to occur, but we do see it in some quilts made during the 1970s and 1980s.

Another type of thread is made with a **polyester core encased in cotton**, resulting in a slightly stretchy thread, but with a traditional look and feel.

To improve longevity, most quilters who sew their quilts with cotton fabric prefer to use all-cotton threads for the majority of projects.

Decorative threads are most popular for wallhangings and show quilts. Do remember, **thread choice is up to each quilter**, so **always** choose a thread that provides the look you want to



Ad for Kerr's Thread, mid 1800s. Photo by Transcendental Graphics/Getty Images

### Threads for Piecing a Quilt

All-cotton threads are readily available and are the best choice for piecing our quilting cottons. Help avoid future wear at the seams by choosing a thread that's no stronger than the fabric. That means it's best to avoid polyester threads and overly strong cotton threads. A hefty thread can also affect seam allowances and accuracy because it takes up too much space in the seam and causes excess bunching.

The threads below are all good choices for piecing, but so are many others. Use my list as a starting point, but be sure to ask staff at your local quilt shops for their recommendations.

- **Aurifil** - An almost lint-free 50 weight thread.
- **YLI Select** - A 40/2 thread made from Egyptian cotton.
- **Gutermann Cotton** - A 50 weight cotton thread.



A quilter hand quilting a quilt. Chris Briscoe Collection / Photolibrary / Getty Images

## Threads Used for Hand and Machine Quilting

Quilters use all sorts of threads for quilting, from cotton to decorative versions. But remember one thing -- **threads developed specifically for hand quilting should not be used in your sewing machine** because they are coated with a glaze that is not machine-compatible. Beyond that, the sky's the limit.

Manufacturer Web sites are a good source of information for threads suitable for hand and machine quilting. Do keep in mind that you must often change your sewing machine's tension when you machine quilt, use a different thread in the bobbin, and choose hand and machine



Decorative Quilting Threads. DigitalVision/Getty Images

## Rayon, Nylon and Metallic Threads for Quilters

**Rayon** is derived from cellulose, but is not classified as a natural fiber because the transformation requires quite a bit of manipulation. Colorful rayon threads are very popular with quilters, and are typically used for machine embroidery and other decorative work. Rayon thread is not used to sew patchwork.

**Nylon** is a synthetic product used to make transparent monofilament thread (one ply), which becomes fairly invisible when used for machine quilting. However, it can melt under an iron, it sometimes discolors, and often becomes brittle with age. A very fine transparent polyester thread is a more durable choice.

**Metallic threads** are typically made from a core of nylon or polyester that's covered with a decorative product. Quality metallic threads also have an outer coating to help protect the delicate metallic layer.

## More Threads for Quilters

You'll encounter threads made from other natural materials, including **wool** and **silk**.

- Wool threads are typically thicker than other threads, and sometimes used to embellish a Folk Art quilt or project with a homespun look.
- Silk threads are sometimes used for applique -- they are fine and make stitches that seem to disappear. Silk threads are also a good choice when beads are added to fabric.

**Water soluble threads** dissolve when a project is washed. They are used for basting, or for any task where temporary stitches are needed.

**Fusible threads** are used to sew a typical seam, but when pressed they stick the sewn fabrics together. Binding and applique are two possible uses for fusible threads.

## Facts About Thread Sizes

Unfortunately, there is no single system used to describe thread sizes.

One common size designation is depicted as a fraction, such as 50/3.

- The first number reveals the thread's weight and the second tells us the number of plies -- a 50/3 thread has a weight of 50 and is made with 3 plies of yarn.
- With this system, thread weight decreases as weight numbers increase. A 50/3 thread is commonly used for piecing, but other equivalent sizes work just as well.

Another sizing system indicates only thread weight.

Sizing systems are complex, and often inaccurate as threads that are imported and exported around the world are re-labeled for a new country. Choose threads based on recommendations from manufacturers, other quilters and your own experience.

## More Thread Terminology

Shopping for thread may introduce you to new terms. A few words you might hear are:

**Mercerized...** Cotton thread is processed with chemicals that give it more luster, improve strength and help it retain dyes. The process also makes thread more fuzzy, which is reduced by putting it through a gassing or singeing process.

**Crocking** occurs when dye on the surface of dry thread (or fabric) rubs off onto other materials.

**Denier**, a sizing method that's often used for continuous filament threads. The number indicates the weight in grams of 9,000 meters of the thread.

### **Decorative Threads for Quilters**

Decorative threads (for hand and machine embroidery and for machine quilting) include the rayon and metallic threads mentioned above. One way to preview these threads is to browse manufacturer websites. Take some time to explore the sites -- most have educational resources to help you choose threads, and they often suggest appropriate needles and other supplies that are required for specific jobs.

[YLI Threads](#)

[Mettler Threads](#)

[Sulky Threads](#)

[Madeira Threads](#)

[Superior Threads](#)

[Valdani Threads](#)

### **A Few Final Words About Threads for Quilters**

I hope my thread tips help new quilters gain a better understanding of thread, but it's simply a basic overview. Entire books can be written about thread and its uses, and the selections are constantly expanding.

- Ask questions about thread -- your local quilt guild and staff at quilt shops are excellent resources.
- Don't hesitate to experiment with thread, because experimentation is one of the best ways to learn about any product.

Once you have sewn with several different threads, you'll have a much better feel for future selections.