

Buying a Sewing Machine

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Guide C-203

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When it's time to buy a sewing machine, the buyer can be nearly overwhelmed by all the decisions. Some of the choices—straight stitch or zig-zag stitch, stretch and fancy stitches, portable or cabinet model machine, regular duty or heavy duty, open arm or flat bed, mechanical or electronic, expensive or inexpensive, new or used, and on and on.

Today's sewing machine market might tempt a buyer to consider a serger, but the serger should not be selected in place of a traditional sewing machine. Although the serger is versatile and easy to use, it isn't possible to do all sewing techniques using a serger. Persons interested in buying a serger should read "Selecting an Overlock Machine," Guide 400 C-218.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Use this checklist as a guide when considering the factors that should influence the kind of sewing machine to buy:

What kind of sewing do you plan to do?

- Make clothes for yourself
- Sew for a growing family
- Mending only
- Decorative sewing
- Sew heavy items like draperies, bedspreads or slip-covers

Where will you use the sewing machine?

- In a sewing room
- In the family room
- On a dining table

Where will the machine be stored?

- In what room
- In a cabinet, and what style
- In a closet, if it is portable
- Does the machine come with a storage case, and is that an extra cost?

How long do you intend to use the machine?

- A few months
- A few years
- Until something new comes out
- All your sewing lifetime

BEFORE YOU BUY

As you consider buying a sewing machine, try to complete each of the following steps on the way to a final choice. Check each item off when it is finished.

- Check out the available sewing machines. Go to a library and read magazine articles on how to buy a sewing machine. Study the articles that compare machine types and brands to determine which are recommended by consumer research services.
- Comparison shop at reliable local dealers. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Check several brands before making the final decision.
- Check all the models. Don't be pushed into buying more machine than you need. The top-of-the-line isn't always the best buy for the money.
- Discuss sewing machines with friends. Which ones have they had good and bad experience with?

- As you shop, try out each machine that interests you. Try it on all the kinds of fabrics you usually sew. Try all the fancy stitch settings; try the stitch length regulator and backstitch setting. Adjust the tension and presser foot.
- Be sure you know exactly what you are getting for the sale price-accessories, guarantee, cabinet or case.
- Be sure you understand all financial obligations involved in buying the machine before making the final decision.

WHICH STITCH FOR YOU?

Consider the types of sewing machines available while shopping. Check for the type that best meets your needs.

Straight stitch. This type is usually the least expensive. It sews forward and backward, and is suitable for mending and routine sewing. It's probably the most practical machine for someone who will sew only a little, or does not intend to use decorative stitching.

Semi-automatic zig-zag machine. This type has all the functions of a straight-stitch machine, plus the ability to do zig-zag and stretch stitching, make buttonholes, finish seam edges, sew stretchy fabrics and, in some cases, blind hem and stretch stitch. The zig-zag machine adds versatility that the capable home sewer may find desirable.

Automatic zig-zag machine (mechanical). This type can do straight, zig-zag and stretch stitching with a wide variety of decorative stitches available. The machine has built-in decorative stitches that are usually selected with hand controls or cams that can be inserted for the desired stitch, or a combination of the two. The combination model is the most versatile. This machine is a good choice for the home sewer who uses decorative stitches often; however, using this type machine to its full potential requires a thorough knowledge of the machine and some practice.

Electronic or computerized machine. This type has the capabilities of the mechanical zig-zag type, and much more. It is controlled by electronic chips, like those found in computers, rather than mechanical parts. The electronic system allows stitches to be selected by pushing a button.

Optimum stitch widths, stitch lengths, and density are programmed into the machine by the manufacturer, but can be adjusted by the user. The best use of this machine depends on a thorough knowledge of the machine and how it is used.

CONSIDER THE COST

When all the comparisons and testing are done, and it's time to buy the sewing machine, carefully weigh the cost factor. Be sure your planned use of special stitches and other fancy features of the machine warrants the expense involved in the initial purchase of the machine. Also, be sure you want to, or have the time to, learn all the skills needed to make full use of the machine's features. Then consider how long you will use the machine. The useful life of a good machine can be 20 years or more. If you intend to use the machine for a long time, you may want to invest more money than if you intend to keep the machine for a short time. Be sure to buy the machine that best suits your needs, for the amount of money you have to spend.

There are sales and special offers that can save the buyer quite a bit of money. However, be wary of special service contracts, special discounts, and "you-have-won-a-machine" offers received in the mail or by telephone. These offers often involve another transaction that is as expensive or more expensive than buying a similar machine from a reliable local dealer.

WHAT ABOUT A USED MACHINE?

Don't eliminate the possibility of buying a good, used sewing machine. In addition to all the things to consider with a new machine, consider the following:

- Has the machine been well cared for?
- There are few, if any, scratches or dents.
- It does not show signs of rough use.
- There are no missing parts.
- Accessories are included (bobbins zipper foot).

How does it operate?

- Foot control or knee lever is easy to operate.
- Belts are in good condition and correctly adjusted.
- Wiring is in good condition.
- The machine runs smoothly, free from excessive vibration and noise.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

Once the important decision is made to buy a particular sewing machine, new or used, there are other things to consider along with the machine itself:

- Is there an instruction manual with the machine?
- Are accessories and extra parts included or can they be bought easily (needles, bobbins, zipper foot, ruffler)?
- Are there lessons available on how to use the machine; free or for a fee?
- Does the dealer have a reputation for satisfied customers?
- Is there a guarantee? What does it cover and for how long? Who is responsible for living up to the guarantee, the dealer or the manufacturer?
- Is local service available?

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