

Selecting Fabrics for Home Furnishings

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Guide G-401

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Never before has there been such a wide variety of fibers, fabrics, colors, designs and textures to select from in home furnishing fabrics. Because of this, the selection of home furnishing fabrics may be an exciting adventure or a depressing nightmare for the homemaker.

SELECTION REQUIRES PLANNING

To select appropriate fabrics for home furnishings projects, you need to plan ahead. Consider your needs carefully by answering these basic questions:

- What is the fabric to be used for?
- What kind of atmosphere do you want to create?
- Who will be using the item you are making?
- Are there colors, textures and/or designs you prefer to use? To avoid?
- How will the item be cleaned—home laundry? dry cleaners?

After you have the answers to these questions, you are ready to make a selection from the wide variety of fabrics available to you.

WHAT TYPE OF FABRICS?

For clues to selecting appropriate fabrics for your home furnishings project, check the “Suggested Fabrics” section of the pattern envelope. If you are not using a commercial pattern, look at similar furnishings on display in department or furniture stores for fabric ideas.

Fabrics designed especially for home furnishings can be found in most fabric stores and many department store fabric sections. Fabric designs are often large and have a specific direction of “nap” in the design. The width is usually 48 inches or wider to facili-

tate cutting large pattern pieces. Knitted fabrics are increasing in popularity for home furnishings because of width, ease of sewing and fiber content.

As you shop, look at the fabric construction. Be sure it is tightly woven or knitted. Avoid fabrics that have excessive sizing (a starch filler) or a coating on the wrong side that may give them such an appearance—they will not wear well. Remember that loosely knitted or woven fabrics and satin weaves are not very durable and tend to show wear quickly.

For durability, select heavy home-furnishing fabrics, as well as corduroy, poplin, denim, tapestry, duck, quilted fabrics and fake fur. For projects that will receive less wear, select from medium- or light-weight upholstery fabrics. You may use apparel fabrics for some home furnishing projects, but select carefully according to fiber content, weave and fabric finishes.

FIBER CONTENT IS IMPORTANT

Consider the purpose of the home-furnishing fabric. If it will receive considerable wear, select a strong fabric with good abrasion resistance. Select fiber content of fabrics carefully for these qualities (table 1). Less durable fibers can be selected for furnishings that receive less wear.

Review the general characteristics of a variety of popular fibers before making your selection.

SPECIAL FINISHES

Many fabrics have special finishes that make them suitable for home furnishings. Check table 2 to determine what characteristics are found in fabrics with selected finishes.

Such finishes will add to the usefulness of home furnishings and to their ease of care.

Table 1. General fiber characteristics.

Fiber	Characteristics
Cotton	Soft, easy to clean, durable, launders well, dyes easily. May lint, creases and wrinkles unless specially finished; subject to mildew.
Linen	Strong, durable. Dyes easily, but colors may run in washing. Somewhat stiff, wrinkles and may shrink unless specially finished. Requires ironing unless treated.
Wool	Resilient, resists wrinkling, dyes well, water repellent, flame resistant, but is susceptible to moths and carpet beetles unless specially treated.
Acetate	Weaker than most fibers, lustrous appearance, drapes well, colors may fume-fade, weakened by sunlight, poor abrasion resistance.
Acrylic	Weak when wet, resists abrasion and wrinkling, dyes well, some tend to pill, accumulates static electricity.
Modacrylic	Resists wrinkling, soft, resilient, noncombustible, dyes well, accumulates static electricity.
Nylon	Strong and elastic, washes easily, resists abrasion, dyes well, but sun will fade, resists wrinkles, moths. May pill, nonabsorbent, but tends to attract dirt.
Olefin	Strong, resists abrasion, lightweight, free from pilling, fast-drying, resists soil, nonabsorbent.
Polyester	Strong; easy-care; resists wrinkles, abrasion, stretching and shrinking; dyes easily; holds color well; may pill; attracts lint; accumulates static electricity; nonabsorbent.
Rayon	Weaker than most fibers, especially when wet. Soft, comfortable, dyes well usually, may shrink or stretch, unless treated, affected by sunlight, wrinkles easily.
Glass	Strong, weather and sun resistant, resists moths, mildew and many chemicals, sheds dust and soil, but has low abrasion resistance.

Table 2. Fabric finishes

Fiber	Characteristics
Durable or Permanent Press	Fabric needs little or no ironing when properly washed and dryer dried; relatively wrinkle-free in use. Finish tends to hold oily stains unless specially treated.
Soil Release	Fabric is more easily "wetted" to facilitate detergent action in washing to release soil. Used with durable press finish. Does not prevent stains.
Water Repellant	Fabric repels water and water-based stains. Does not waterproof fabric.
Soil and Stain Repellant	Repels water and oil-based stains.
Flame Retardant	Ignited fabric will self-extinguish when source of flame is removed. Requires special laundering procedure to maintain effectiveness.
Crease, Wrinkle Resistant	Fabric wrinkles less than normal. Applied to cotton, linen, rayon and blends. Tends to retain oil-borne stains.
Shrinkage Control	Fabric shrinkage limited to specific amount 1 percent, 2 percent, etc. Does not guarantee "No shrinkage," therefore, preshrink fabrics before use.

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SOME CAUTIONS

After you have narrowed your choice to three or four fabrics, check for correct grainline and on-grain printing.

The fabric should be woven so that the lengthwise and crosswise grains cross at right angles. If the fabric is knitted, the ribs should be parallel to the selvage on the right side of the fabric. Occasionally, fabric is "finished off-grain" when a special finish is applied (i.e., wrinkle resistant, durable press, etc.). If this occurs, the grainline position cannot be corrected. This will make matching of stripes and plaids difficult; avoid such fabrics.

Frequently, designs on the fabric are printed "off-grain." The design may slant to one side or "bow" the design curves up or down in the center of the fabric. If the design is "off-grain," it will be difficult to match the fabric design in an attractive way or to cut the item on the correct grainline.

To check for these problems, study the fabric design along each selvage of the fabric to be sure it is parallel. Then study the crosswise design of the fabric; it should be perpendicular to the selvages.

*Originally written by Susan Wright,
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