

Blocking Lace

by Jackie Erickson-Schweitzer

Blocking is the final step in finishing a knitted lace project. In the blocking process, the piece is slightly stretched to open out the yarnovers and give crisp definition to the pattern. I like to use a wet-blocking method that begins with immersing the piece in water. Then, after blotting out most of the moisture, I gently stretch and shape it on a flat surface. I pin the piece as needed, before allowing it to dry. You can weave ends in invisibly either before or after blocking—it's your choice. If you weave them in before, leave enough of a tail to allow for stretching, and then trim any remaining ends after you complete the blocking.

Prepare the blocking surface

You can block a project on any stable surface large enough to accommodate the planned dimensions. The surface should be clean and nonreactive (it won't leach out dyes or chemicals). If necessary, cover the surface with towels or a blanket to protect it from moisture. For tension blocking, the surface should be able to accept pins and hold them securely. I have found polystyrene (builders' Styrofoam) to be a good choice.

Washing

Fill a clean container or washbasin with lukewarm water and thoroughly mix in a small amount of mild laundry detergent. Gently submerge the lace in the water and soak for at least 30 minutes. Some fibers, especially silk, take a lot longer than you expect to get thoroughly wet. Once the fiber is thoroughly wet, drain and gently press out most of the water. Refill the container with water at the original temperature and rinse gently. Again press out most of the water. Finish by pressing the article between two thirsty bath towels (do not rub or twist).

Pinning out

I like to block a knitted piece by gently stretching and shaping it so the pattern opens up and the edges are straight. When I'm satisfied with the arrangement of the piece, I usually pin it out to keep it stretched as it dries. The dampness allows the fibers to relax and stretch. Although you want to think "handle gently," you can stretch the piece quite a bit, as long as you do so uniformly.

For moderate tension, finger-block the lace by stretching and shaping the still-damp fabric as desired with your hands. Then let the surface tension between the blocking surface and knitted fabric hold the piece in shape until it dries.

To block a piece under higher tension, you need rustproof pins (T-shaped pins are great) and wires or smooth silk or cotton cording. The advantage in using wires or cording as a means to stretch the piece is that they enable you to make adjustments, create an even tension overall, and make straight edges. If a piece has a pointed or wavy border, of course, you can simply pin out the edges around the lace at consistently spaced intervals.

Weave the ends of the wires or cording in and out along the edges

of the lace. When necessary, overlap the sections to accommodate the length of the lace. Use pins to hold the wires or cording taut—the pins don't go through the actual knitting.

Drying

It is very important to let the lace dry thoroughly in place. Doing so takes longer than the "dry to the feel" test because the fiber surface can be dry while the interior still holds moisture. Be patient. The drying time will depend on your climate. The rule of thumb is to wait 24 hours. If you are in a hurry or need help in a humid climate, turn on a fan to increase air circulation.

Though it may seem like a lot of work, careful wet-blocking will more than compensate for the effort involved. The crowning moment comes when you release the lace from its blocking pins and wires and hold it up to admire its airy beauty! ∞



Photos by Jason Reid

Above: T-pins secure the points of a scalloped edge.

Below: Blocking wires keep edges straight.

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