

It's Not the Size of your Stash-- It's How You Use & Store it!

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As quilters, we all tend to build a stash of fabrics that we adore. As humans, we tend to lose track of what we have and accumulate much more than we need. I might even dare to say that some of us hoard our fabric and do not put it to its best use. Have you heard the saying, "The one who dies with the most fabric wins!"? I would like to change it to, "The one who actually can find the fabric in their stash and have more time for quilting is the real winner." If you want to spend more time quilting, then it is to your benefit to spend less time searching through mountains of fabric for the one that you need. Ask yourself these questions and then read on.

- Is your stash all in one place or spread out over your home and car?
- Is your stash organized or in random piles?
- Can you find the fabric that you want when you need it?
- Do you know what fabrics you have or do you tend to unknowingly purchase repeats when fabric shopping?
- Do you have a wide range of colors and tints or are you lacking in certain color groups?
- How do you choose a project from your stash?

In this article I will give you some tips on how to organize, store, manage, and use your stash. Organizing your stash will help you to quickly locate what you need for any project. Proper methods of storing will preserve your precious stash fabrics. Using your stash will allow you to revolve your fabrics and replenish older ones with newer finds.

Start with Organization: Choose a Location and Sort

The number one key to knowing what you have in your stash is organization. There are many different ways to stack and sort your fabric stash. When you find a system that works for you it will be obvious because you will be able to quickly locate the one fabric you need and easily find fabrics that will compliment it, for a wonderful quilt right at your fingertips!

First, by gathering all your fabrics into **one location**, you can visually see what you actually have and then find what you are looking for more efficiently. You might use a box, a bookcase, a closet, or even an entire room. No matter, gathering your stash into one location is a grand beginning.

Your next step in the organization process is to take all of your fabrics out of the random bags and boxes they may currently be stored in. If you feel that you need to keep the receipts so that you know where you purchased the fabric, you can put them in a notebook with a snip of each fabric attached. An even easier way to identify where a particular fabric was purchased is to write the name of the store in the selvage with a permanent pigment pen made especially for fabric. Personally, I never worry about keeping receipts or marking where I purchased the fabric. Chances are, I will not be able to purchase the same fabric after six months has gone by. I know that I will plan to make due and improvise with what I have on hand. I learned a long time ago that the "great fabric hunt" rarely yields results and if it does, the dye lot is a bit off from the original.

Take a few minutes, hours, or days to adore and handle your fabrics. You may quickly spot some pieces that are outdated, of poor quality, or just not to your liking anymore. Set those aside for charity quilts or a yard sale. Make a rule: Once set aside, that piece of fabric does not return. You will most likely see so many other beautiful fabrics that you won't miss the rejects. I have often wondered, if one were to gather together all of the unwanted fabrics in the country, how big a pile would it make? Would it cover the state of Rhode Island or Texas? How many charity quilts would it make? With this in mind, pass it on so that someone else can put it to good use.

The next step in organizing is the fun step of sorting. Ready? Many quilters (including myself) sort by color. For many quilting projects, color is the main factor in choosing fabrics. I have my fabrics sorted into white, cream, tan, gray, yellow, gold, orange, pink, red, lavender, violet, light blue, royal blue, dark blue, light green, darker green, brown, and black. This adds up to 18 piles. You may not have space for or need this many piles so adjust and combine as you wish. Beyond this, I also have separate piles for my novelty prints. When a fabric contains many colors, it may be difficult to determine what the main color is, so I will treat these as novelty prints and keep them separate. I also keep my Christmas fabrics in a separate area. I make many donated items for the holiday bazaar but only need these fabrics for a few months out of the year. I also keep my batik fabrics separate as I use these mostly in my art quilts. Decide which fabrics you will keep separate depending on your quilting style and needs.

This is a good time to address the size of your fabric stash pieces. I tend to keep anything and everything down to a 2 inch square or a 2 inch strip. Any fabric scraps are immediately cut into squares or strips. My self-set limit is no square or strip smaller than 2 inches or larger than 3 inches. I do have a separate box to hold my 2", 2 ½", and 3" squares and another box for my 2", 2 ½", and 3" strips. Anything smaller gets tossed and anything larger gets folded back in with my fabric stash. Decide what the size limit of your stash pieces will be and stick to it.

Now that you have your fabrics sorted, this is the perfect time to wash and dry them if you have not already done so. As I have written before, all of my fabric stash is washed, dried, and pressed. And since the piles are already separated into colors, this is the perfect time to do this. Use your *Quick Wash* cycle. Then just toss in the dryer for a quick tumble dry. By performing this step, my fabric is ready to use when I am ready to make a new quilt or wall hanging. Critters like silverfish are attracted to the sizing in fabrics, so this is another good incentive to wash before storing.

Follow Through with Storage: Ideas for Storing and Stacking

Now that you are busy sorting, cutting, tossing, cuddling, and getting familiar with your stash, you will want to consider what system you will use for storage. Home improvement stores and discount stores carry a myriad of storage systems, shelves, boxes, baskets, and bins for any lifestyle. Here are a few suggestions:

- Clear plastic bins that can stack or slide under the bed.
- Wire shelving units or modular units that can adapt to a closet space.
- Free standing modular or wire units (some even have wheels).
- Furniture pieces such as bureaus, bookcases, filing cabinets, armoires, etc.

Whether you purchase new or repurpose, it is important to line wood or metal shelving so that fabrics will not touch bare wood or uncoated metal. This will help to avoid staining from wood or rusting from metal. Also consider storing your fabrics in an environment where you, yourself feel comfortable. A basement is often too damp and musty. An attic is often too dry and dusty. Kitchens have far too many aromas that can penetrate fabrics. A cat's favorite place to sleep is on a soft new pile of fabric, so keep fabrics kitty-free too.

My stash is stacked in a closet with coated wire shelving. The coating on the wire means that I do not have to line my shelves, they never gather dust, and the air can circulate around my fabric at all times. Air circulation is important to prevent mildew in humid climates and weather conditions. Controlling the humidity in your storage area is important. I live in an area where the summer months become very humid so I have a hygrometer in my studio. This inexpensive tool reads dry, normal, or humid. When the gauge points to the high normal or low humid range I bring out my dehumidifier to keep my fabric in its best condition.

Protect your stash from sunlight. Even the smallest ray of indirect sunlight will begin the fading process after only a few hours. A closet with a solid door or a heavy lined curtain will give the best protection.

So you have your fabrics sorted, washed (or not), and your storage area arranged. The next step is pressing and folding your fabrics so that they will fit neatly into your storage space and stack nicely for viewing. Remember, you want to see all of your fabrics at a glance when choosing for a project. Now you will need to determine what size to fold your fabrics so that they will stack neatly. Think of your fabric pieces as file folders arranged to easily view, flip through, and retrieve. This may sound a bit obsessive to some of you, but it works for me. I know what I have for fabric at a glance, can quickly retrieve it, and it is ready to lay on my cutting board to begin my project that very moment.

The smallest piece of fabric that I ever purchase is one quarter of a yard or a Fat Quarter. After that I usually purchase in half yard increments up to 3 yards. These will all be stored in my fabric stash. Anything larger than 3 yards is usually for a backing, which I wash and press and hang on a hanger with my quilt project or store separately, rolled back onto a cardboard bolt. Your quilt shop will most likely be happy to give you empty bolts.

I like to fold all of my fabric pieces with the right side out and all the same size. This allows me to stack them easily with the folds all on the same side of the stack. This makes each fabric highly visible and I can "flip" through my fabric stack with ease. Here is my Folding Method.

- Step 1: A one yard piece of fabric gets folded in half lengthwise (selvages together - same as it comes off the bolt in the store) yielding a 20" x 36" strip.
- Step 2: Fold in half in the same direction again yielding a 10" x 36" strip.
- Step 3: Fold in half raw edges to raw edges yielding a 10" x 18" rectangle.
- Step 4: Fold in half the same way one more time. This yields a nice stackable almost square of fabric 10" x 9".

Any other cut yardage gets folded using the same steps 1 and 2 with adjustments to steps 3 and 4 to yield approximately the same size. Not only are these fabric folds easy to stack but they are also ready for cutting after unfolding back to steps 1 or 2.

Now that your fabrics are folded, sorted, and stacked, stand back and admire. You can quickly see what colors are missing from your stash and what colors you have an overabundance of. Many quilters find that they are heavy on the prints and medium color fabrics and short on lights and darks. You will also reveal your fabric style, taste, and color preference. Without realizing it, quilters tend to automatically coordinate their stash by choosing colors that they like and gravitate to.

Finish with Use: Pulling a Project from Your Stash

With your stash in order, you can quickly pull fabrics needed for a project. After choosing your color palette, all you need to do is go to the stacks containing the chosen colors. Here is an easy way to keep your stacks neat and in order. Keep a piece of heavy cardboard cut slightly larger than your folded fabrics, mine is 12" x 12", near your storage stacks. If you only need one or two pieces of fabric from a stack, flip through the color stack until you spot the piece that you like. Place your hand on top of that fabric and gently lift the front of the stack. Slide the cardboard all the way into the stack and you will be able to gently pull out

the folded fabric piece. Reverse this process to replace a piece of folded fabric back into a stack.

If you are making a large quilt that requires many fabrics, or a planned scrap quilt that requires even more, simply pull out an entire color stack and place it on a table. This will make it easier to pull multiple fabrics and then restack. Fan out the chosen fabrics on the table and stand back to view them as a unit. Any colors that do not "belong" will instantly pop out at you. Viewing the chosen fabrics through a camera lens will also help you to see which ones do not work.

I have found that smaller projects can usually come right out of my stash. However, even owning a fairly large stash, rarely can I gather all of the fabrics for a large quilt entirely from my stash. I usually need to take a trip to the quilt shop to find a few fill in fabrics or borders. Am I disappointed that I don't have all the fabrics I need? Of course not! This provides an opportunity to explore the fabric shop again and see what is new! After all, who can resist the sight and feel of new fabric?!

Pat Ferguson has been longarm quilting since 2004 from her studio in Ashford, Connecticut. She has been teaching and machine quilting on a domestic machine since 1985. Her personal and customer quilts have won numerous awards and have been seen in various publications. Pat is a proud member of Studio Art Quilt Associates (saqa.org), Artists Open Studios of Northeast Connecticut (aosct.org), and International Machine Quilters Association (IMQA) along with two local quilt guilds. Visit www.patfergusonquilts.com to find out more about Pat, her quilts, classes, and quilt care and storage products.

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