

To Wash or Not to Wash.....

Preparing Your Cotton Quilting Fabrics & Batting

Permission to is given by "On Track!" magazine to print this article by Pat Ferguson which first appeared in the Winter 2010 issue.

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Many years ago, when I first ventured into the world of quilting, the great "quilting controversy" was hand quilting vs. machine quilting. In the 80's it was considered taboo, cheating and lack of skill to hold the three layers of a quilt together with machine quilting. We had finally accepted machine piecing but definitely not machine quilting. Now that machine quilters have proven their skill and value, it is widely acceptable. Categories have been established in shows especially for machine quilting.

There will always be a controversy with new issues emerging, but one longstanding and ongoing controversy is whether or not to wash your quilting fabrics and batting. There are as many reasons for washing fabric and batting as there are for not washing them. After teaching quilting for over 25 years, I have heard all the arguments and seen all the results. I would like to address each argument that I have heard and give my opinions and observations in this ongoing debate.

I don't have time to wash my quilting fabric:

I hear this quite often. Washing or rinsing really doesn't take that much time if you wash larger quantities of fabric or mix them in with your regular light weight laundry. As soon as a new piece of fabric enters my studio, it goes right into the laundry room. If I have purchased for an entire quilt, there is usually enough fabric to do a small machine load of light/ medium colors and a small machine load of medium/dark colors on the quick wash cycle. If my shopping trip yields only a few pieces of fabric and I don't need them right away, I will wait until I accumulate enough fabric to produce a small load or I may rinse them by hand in the sink.

Washing or rinsing by hand in the sink is a great way to catch any "bleeder" fabrics. Some fabrics need to be rinsed several times to remove the excess dye while a "bleeder" will never stop oozing dye that will migrate into surrounding fabric patches. It only takes one "bleeder" fabric to ruin an entire quilt. I own one such scrap quilt that has 2 tiny red patches that bleed every time I wash the quilt. Luckily, it is only a utility quilt used by my family, but it is a reminder to me every time I make any quilt, utility or masterpiece - I need to carefully check for bleeding.

Personally, I am not a risk taker. One yard of \$9.00 "bleeder" fabric can ruin an entire queen quilt (10 yards front fabric plus 9 yards backing fabric) at a cost of \$171.00. To me, that is too high a price to pay for saving a few minutes of washing or rinsing time. There are chemicals that can be purchased to help control the bleeding, but I prefer to avoid that particular piece of fabric altogether.

Batiks are already washed and do not need to be washed again:

It is true that Batiks are washed to remove the wax used in the dyeing process, so they are probably already preshrunk. The problem with batiks is that they are dyed and over dyed and retain much of that dye when you purchase them. These are best hand rinsed so that they can be checked for bleeding. When I began collecting batiks, I noticed that many of the darker ones needed to be rinsed several times before the excess dye was

removed. Some of them never completely rinsed out. If placed in a predominantly dark quilt, chances are, a bleeder will never be noticed in the finished quilt.

My fabrics fray too much when I wash them:

There are several ways to easily avoid this fraying problem. Avoid washing and drying for too long a period of time- the agitation and tumbling cause the fabric to fray. One technique that works, to some degree, is to diagonally cut each corner of the fabric piece. Another technique is to cut the raw edges with a pinking shear or pinking rotary blade. For smaller pieces of fabric, place them in a lingerie bag to wash and dry. Although this takes a bit more time, I have even seen some quilters run the raw edges through a serger or use an overlock stitch on the sewing machine.

I like the crisp feeling of new fabric:

That crisp feeling in new fabric is the sizing that is added in the factory printing process. Sizing does add a stiffness that makes the fabric easier to handle but it will leave the fabric when you wash or rinse it. On the other hand, if you do fusible appliqué, the sizing can keep some fusible products from bonding properly. In this case it is important to wash or rinse out the sizing and to avoid using fabric softener and dryer sheets which will also interfere with the fusible product bonding properly.

So you have washed your fabric to preshrink and remove excess dye but you like the crispness. You can easily add the stabilizing crispness back by using a spray sizing or light spray starch to fabrics that you will use for piecing. Only spray size the pieces that you need and place the rest of the washed fabric back into your stash.

Fabrics can be dried on the line instead of the dryer:

You can certainly hang fabrics to dry, but drying in an automatic dryer, on a gentle cycle with low heat; will help the fabric shrink to its potential finished size. The heat can also help to set the color. All fabrics do not shrink at the same rate. If you wait to wash your quilt after it is complete, an otherwise flat quilt can become uneven.

When machine drying fabrics use a low to medium temperature, taking care not to dry any longer than necessary. The tumbling action can cause fabrics to fray. Too much heat and over drying can set in wrinkles that are difficult to press out.

I don't like to press anything:

Pressing is an important step to good quality quilting. A well pressed piece of fabric stores in your stash more easily and cuts more accurately when making a pieced quilt. If it is pressed before placing into your stash, it will be ready to use when you take it out of your stash. There are wonderful steam irons, pressing machines and large ironing boards on the market that make the task easier. To avoid stretching fabric pieces while pressing, move the iron up and down the length of the selvage edge, not across from side to side. Put on a good movie or your favorite music and the ironing process will be much more enjoyable.

Some of my stash is washed and some isn't:

Most quilters start their stashes out this way, as did I. If your stash is just a mad pile of unorganized fabric, washing could be an ideal way to organize it and get control. Pretend you are doing laundry and sort your stash into three piles of light, medium and dark colors. If you have a very large stash you can further divide these piles into specific colors. They will wash and dry in no time. Pressing takes a bit longer but can be done over time.

This task can seem overwhelming but just think of all the fabrics that you may have forgotten about and what will come out of hiding! You may even find a few lost books and patterns tucked inside the fabric mounds. Quilters love the feel of their fabrics and you will be reconnecting with every piece- think of it as fabric shopping at home. It might even spark some new ideas. Invite a friend to help, give away older fabrics and ones that you no longer like or need.

It's just a wall hanging that will never get washed anyway:

That may be true today, but what if there is a broken pipe or smoke damage in the home and it affects the wall hanging? Then it will need to be cleaned and what will happen to it? Will it shrink or bleed? If the fabric is prepared before the wall hanging is made, washing it will not affect its quality should the need ever arise.

I'll just use up this old batting in my quilt:

Good quality pre-shrunk batting inside your quilt is just as important as the fabric on the outside of your quilt. You want a quilt to last for many years and to remain soft, warm and supple. While preparing fabric for the front side of a quilt, it is just as important to prepare the batting for the finishing stages.

Polyester battings don't shrink so why bother washing:

This is true but they sometimes come out of the package with wrinkles and lumps. To smooth out the batting, gently unfold it and place in an automatic dryer. Air fluff on low heat and delicate cycle for approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Your batting will be smooth and relaxed and so will you as you effortlessly layer your quilt.

The batting package says "No Need to Prewash":

Cotton, and blend battings will always shrink and need to be preshrunk just as you would prewash fabric. If you can get the "spec" sheet from your batting manufacturer, you will find that they will usually shrink 1% when machine washed in cold water only and up to 3% when machine washed in warm water and dried in an automatic dryer. If you do the math, 3% equals 3" inches in a 100" quilt- that is quite a bit of puckering if you have washed your fabrics but not washed your batting.

Batting must be handled much more carefully than fabric, as it is not a woven product like fabric. For the best results choose a needle punched or bonded batting. These are a bit stronger and will not migrate or tear. These battings also tend to lay flatter and are more stable (not stretchy), making them easier to work with, especially for machine quilters.

Another reason to rinse batting depends on the batting color. White batting is bleached and has no color but natural batting when rinsed, can actually turn the rinse water a yellowish tint. Can you imagine what could happen to a white quilt with natural batting that has not been pre-rinsed?

Small battings can be rinsed in the sink by hand. Larger battings can be rinsed in the machine. Unfold batting and place it in your machine. Let the machine fill with warm water. Stay by your machine so that it does not go into its agitation cycle and using your hands, push the batting under the water until it is entirely wet. Manually skip the agitation cycle and go directly to the spin cycle. (If your washing machine has a rinse only cycle, be sure that it does not agitate during this cycle). The batting can go into the automatic dryer on a gentle cycle with low heat. It will not take long to dry and should be nice and flat and a bit fluffier.

I have an unwashed quilt top that I finished years ago. Since then I now wash all my fabrics. Do I add washed or unwashed fabric and batting to complete this quilt?

This is a question that I am frequently asked. My answer is "You have a few choices"

Alternative #1

If the top is unwashed, you can add unwashed fabric to complete it, along with unwashed batting and unwashed backing. Quilt, bind and complete the entire quilt. Then machine wash the completed quilt in cold water, cross your fingers and pray that none of the fabrics

bleed. There is a product that can be added to the wash cycle to catch extra dye. Immediately dry the quilt in an automatic dryer on gentle cycle and low heat setting and hope that fabrics and batting shrink at the same rate.

Alternative #2

Hand wash the quilt top in warm water. Roll the top in large clean towels and gently blot out most of the water. Place sheets on a large and flat surface carefully spread the quilt top flat out on the sheets to air dry. I do not recommend machine drying a pieced top because the seams can stress and fray and the quilt can become skewed. When the quilt is still a bit damp, press with an iron, being aware of seam direction. Pressing while damp will help to preshrink it some. Now you can add pre washed and dried backing and batting.

If I don't wash & dry, I can spend more time making quilts:

One student wrote to me:

"Thanks for the great advice. Since your classes I am now washing all my fabric, backing and batting. This takes a big load off my mind!"

Many others are now avid fabric and batting washers giving them more control over the final outcome of their quilts, along with peace of mind. Considering the amount of time spent on making a quilt and the amount of money spent on the fabric- the time it takes to wash, dry and press is priceless.

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