



Threads of Truth

by Carrie Hargrave

Overwhelmed by the sheer variety of threads on the market? You are not alone. It's hard to make that all-important decision about what thread(s) to carry in your store when there are so many varied advertising claims to sort through. But understanding a few thread technicalities will go a long way toward helping you fulfill your customers' needs.

Think about what the most important part of a quilt is. Is it the fabric? The pattern? How it's quilted? These are all important to the quilt's overall appearance, but it could be argued that thread is actually the most important part of a quilt. It not only holds the piecing together, but also creates the decorative stitching and embellishment on the top of the quilt. Should the selection of such an important element really be left to hype and advertising? Or should there be some basic guidelines for what threads work best and are most appropriate for each quilting and sewing application?

The list of threads and thread sizes provided in this article is not complete by any means. In recent years there has been an explosion of threads coming onto the market, and some manufacturers have changed how some of their threads are made. Still, general categories remain that haven't changed.

Thread Basics

Choosing the "right" thread begins with understanding a few thread basics. Least understood of these is the system used to measure thread weight.

English cotton count method, the generally recognized weight and ply system, is probably the best known system for measuring thread weight. This system denotes how many 840-yard hanks of a given thread are required to make 1 pound. For 50-weight thread, 50 hanks, thus 42,000 yards, make up 1 pound. Therefore, the larger the weight number, the finer the thread.

Thread ply denotes how many strands of that 50-weight thread are twisted together to create the finished product. Among quilting threads, there are 50/2 and 50/3 threads, for two-ply and three-ply, respectively. Yet today many thread

companies are dropping the ply number from their thread packaging, leaving quilters to wonder whether the thread is two-ply or three-ply. Why does this matter? It matters because the difference in strength and durability of a three-ply thread over a two-ply thread is immense. Contrary to what some thread marketing might claim, not all 50-weight threads are created equal.

Tex system is the other common system used today for denoting thread weight. This is a direct measure based on the weight in grams of one kilometer of thread. For testing purposes, this is the most logical system in use; it makes threads much easier to categorize. With the tex system you can readily identify that one thread is finer than the other just by the number. On average, a 50/2 thread will have a tex number from 21 to 24 while a 50/3 thread will have a tex number of 32 to 37. This is a big difference, not just in size but also in performance.

Twist also plays a part in thread selection, though it is not readily identifiable to a thread buyer. Suffice it to say that up to a certain point, the more tightly twisted a thread is, the stronger it is. In general, the more plies of thread twisted together, the more twists it will have, making three-ply thread generally more durable than two-ply thread.

Thread is twisted in one of two directions and these are known as Z-twist and S-twist, as shown in the illustration. S-twist threads are used mainly for handwork such as bobbin lace and embroidery. The Z-twist is found in most threads designed to run through a machine.



Pairing Thread to Purpose

What thread is best for what purpose? Let's look at four basic categories of thread for domestic machine quilting:

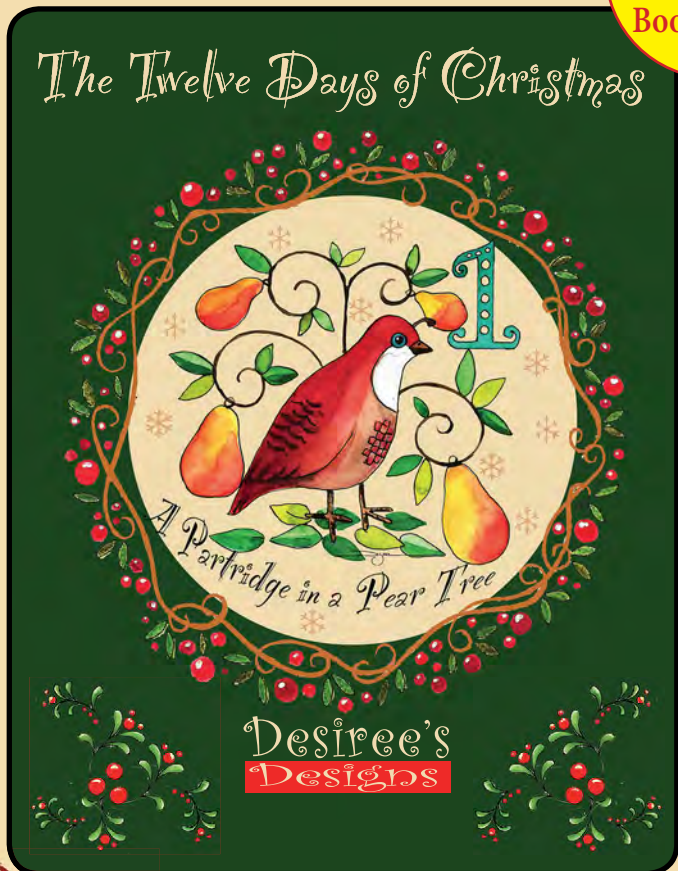
- 100% cotton
- Cotton/polyester blends and 100% polyester
- 100% silk
- Invisible threads, both nylon and polyester

What follows in each category is a listing of the weights of thread in that category, what company or companies produce

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each one, what it is best used for, and the recommended machine needle size for each weight.

100% Cotton

The categories of three-ply cotton thread and two-ply cotton thread seem to be surrounded in controversy, especially in the 50-weight size. This stems from quilters' use of a 1/4" seam allowance and quilters' desire to make accurate units and blocks for quilts. The unfortunate fact is that a true, perfect 1/4" seam doesn't work. With a full 1/4" seam, there is no allowance for the weight of the thread in the seam or the bend of the fabric when the seam allowance is pressed to one side.

Because of this, many quilters started to use 50/2 thread for piecing. Since this thread is finer, it "bought back" a small amount of space and made their piecing more accurate. But when these quilts are not quilted relatively heavily, to support the seams, the piecing seams start to come apart. Three-ply thread, on the other hand, is designed for piecing, with its third ply giving it durability and its heavier twist giving it more strength.

When using 50/2 for piecing, there are two techniques for ensuring the seams' longevity: (1) shorten the stitch length so there is more thread in the seam, and (2) stitch lines of quilting no more than 1" apart.

Quilters who like working with three-ply thread may adjust the seam allowance to accommodate the thread. Ideal is to stitch a scant 1/4" seam allowance based on the position of the needle and nothing else. With many 1/4" presser feet, the needle is not exactly centered with the foot, and the result is a seam allowance that is too wide. Instead, the needle position can be adjusted or a seam guide used for guiding the fabric through the stitching process at a scant 1/4" width. Many tools on the market today can help with this, such as the Perfect Piecing Seam Guide by Perkins Dry Goods.

Cotton Three-Ply Thread

17/3

Brands: Superior Threads

Recommended uses: embellishments; not really appropriate for piecing or quilting

Needle size: 100/16

40/3

Brands: Presencia, Superior, YLI

Recommended uses: construction with heavyweight fabric, machine quilting, hand quilting, and hand stitching bindings and hanging sleeves

Needle size: 90/14



Superior Threads (King Tut)

50/3

Brands: Coats & Clark; Machine Quilting & Crafts, Machine Quilting; Gutermann; Presencia; Robison-Anton; Signature; Superior

Recommended uses: construction seams for piecing; quilting when the quilting lines are 3" apart or less; top and bobbin or bobbin with nylon in top

Needle size: 80/12 or 75/11



60/3

Brands: Presencia

Recommended uses: construction seams for piecing, especially to achieve an accurate seam allowance when using a 1/4" foot; quilting when quilting lines are 3" apart or less; top and bobbin or bobbin with nylon in top

Needle size: 75/11 or 70/10

Cotton Two-Ply Thread

25/2, 28/2, and 30/2

Brands: Aurifil, Mettler Machine Embroidery, Robison-Anton, Sulky

Recommended uses: embellishment, buttonhole and blanket stitch appliqué, and heavy machine quilting

Needle size: 80/12 or 75/11

40/2

Brands: Aurifil, Mettler Quilting*, YLI Select

Recommended uses: decorative quilting, embellishment, buttonhole and blanket stitch appliqué

Needle size: 75/11 or 70/10

50/2

Brands: Aurifil, Star, DMC Embroidery, Mettler Silk-Finish*, Valdani

Recommended uses: machine piecing with very short



Aurifil

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stitches, paper piecing with very short stitches, machine quilting 1" or closer, top and bobbin thread or bobbin thread with nylon in top, top thread for satin or straight stitch appliqué, bobbin thread for all forms of machine appliqué, machine embroidery, buttonholes on garments
Needle size: 70/10, 65/9, or 60/8



* In both the 40/2 and 50/2 category, the threads made by Mettler don't really fit. About seven years ago, the company changed how these threads are manufactured. They used to be three-ply threads, but were changed to two-ply threads. The "new" renditions still weight out scientifically to be equal to a three-ply, which means they can't be 40 or 50 weight. These two threads are more appropriately listed under the three-ply category. These are good threads, just confusingly labeled.

60/2

Brands: Mettler Fine Embroidery, YLI Soft Touch
Recommended uses: machine piecing with very short stitches, paper piecing with very short stitches, machine quilting 1" or closer, top and bobbin thread or bobbin thread with nylon in top, top thread for satin or straight stitch appliqué, bobbin thread for all forms of machine appliqué, machine embroidery, buttonholes on garments
Needle size: 70/10, 65/9 or 60/8

Cotton/Polyester Blend and 100% Polyester Thread

Contrary to popular opinion, this category is not "quilt friendly." Polyester is a very strong fiber, so if the finished quilt is not quilted well enough to support the seams, this thread can act a bit like a chain saw and cut the fabric as the quilt is used. Save this thread for quickie giveaway quilts or better yet, garments.

Cotton/Poly

Brands: Coats & Clark, Cotton-Covered, All Purpose
Recommended uses: garment construction
Needle size: 90/14



Polyester

Brands: Mettler Metrosene, Superior Sew Fine! #50 and The Bottom Line
Recommended uses: bobbin thread for embellishment (for rayon and metallic threads), garment construction of synthetic and blended fiber fabrics
Needle size: 75/11, 70/10, 65/9 or 60/8



100% Silk Thread

50/3, 100/3

Brands: Clover Tire Silk, Gutermann Silk
Recommended uses: quilting, embroidery, embellishment
Needle size: 70/10 or 65/9

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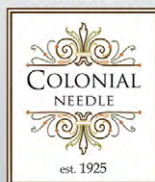


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50/2, 100/2

Brands: YLI #50, #100

Recommended uses: very close machine quilting, embroidery, fine heirloom sewing, hand appliqué

Needle size: 60/8

100% Nylon or Polyester Monofilament Thread

"Invisible" Nylon or Polyester Monofilament

Brands: Coats & Clark Transparent Nylon, Prym-Dritz Nylon, EZ Stitch-Thru Invisible Thread, Gutermann Invisible, Madeira Monofil No. 40, Madeira Monofil No.

60, Signature Transparent Nylon, Sulky Invisible Polyester, Superior Thread MonoPoly, YLI Wonder Invisible Nylon Thread

Recommended uses: machine quilting, invisible machine appliqué and embellishment (couching)

Needle size: 70/10, 65/9 or 60/8



Choosing Thread for Your Shop

Do your own research about the threads you currently own or sell. Test, test, test! Make sample blocks, sew strips together, and then try to tear them apart by hand. See whether the thread gives out or the fabric does. If the thread does, then that thread is not the best choice for your project. If the fabric tears first, leaving the seam intact, then that thread is too strong and you may want to make a different selection. What

you want is for the whole thing to give out at about the same time. This is called seam failure rate and it should be between 55 and 65 percent for a durable quilt.

As a shopowner or buyer, explore all the thread companies, see what they offer, and listen to the sales presentation. But don't buy until you get a chance to use the thread and see how it performs for you. Also consider your shop's specialty: traditional quilts, modern quilts, art quilts? Once you have examined all of this, you will be better able to select brands of thread to match your customers' quilting needs. For art quilts you may want to have a brand of rayon for surface embellishments in addition to threads for piecing and quilting. If your store is mostly traditional, a brand or two of basic piecing and quilting threads may be adequate.

Experiment and play with more than one brand or type of thread before you commit to anything. There is not a single thread on the market that is good for all uses—no matter what the advertising may claim.



Carrie Hargrave conducted a study, "The Physical Property of Quilting Threads," for her master's program at the University of Wyoming. If you have thread questions, contact her at threadscience@earthlink.net.

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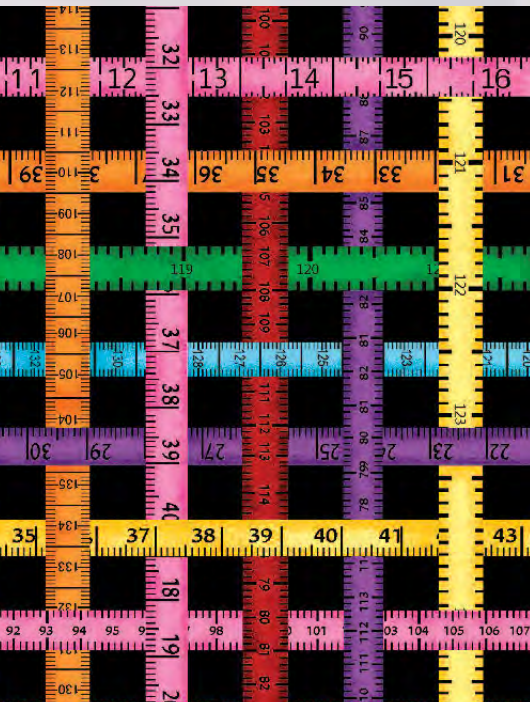


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