

Charming Station

Quilt Project

Pre-Washing Fabrics



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Should You Pre-wash Your Fabrics?

This topic can cause a roaring argument among seasoned quilters. Some will tell you they never pre-wash their fabrics and others will swear that you must always pre-wash all of your fabrics. Some go so far as to wash everything they buy as soon as they come home before they put it with the rest of their stash!

The fact is, there are some reasons why you might want to pre-wash and there is some information that may mean you don't have to. What we are going to do here is take a look at both sides of the issue.

Why would you pre-wash?

There are several specific reasons why you might want to wash all of the fabrics you are going to use in a quilt.

1. **100% cotton fabric MAY shrink.** The real issue is not *if* the fabric will shrink - the real issue is whether all of the fabrics you plan to use will ***shrink at the same exact rate***. If you use a variety of fabrics in your quilt (and most of us will) you run the risk of having one fabric shrink more than another. The fabric that shrinks will pull inward and cause wrinkles, bubbles or outright distortion in the quilt. Unfortunately, there is no way to tell whether a fabric will shrink (or how much) just by looking at it.

The fact is that quilt stores usually have a higher quality of fabric than the discounts or chain stores. Part of this higher quality is that the grieger goods that the fabric is made with are a better quality. The higher quality fabrics do not shrink as much as fabrics from discounts or chains.

The only way to avoid all possibilities of shrinkage is to wash all of your fabrics before you start cutting.

Do you have to? It's up to you - if you purchased all of your fabrics from a quilt store and/or are comfortable with the idea that a little uneven shrinkage might happen after the quilt is finished then skip the pre-wash.

2. **Fabrics may have sizing or other chemicals on it when you buy it.** Fabric manufacturers want to make their fabric as attractive as possible for you while it is on the shelf in the store so the process of making fabric may include adding a chemical rinse to keep it from wrinkling and to make it look as nice as possible on the shelf. Many fabrics also have formaldehyde or other chemicals on them to prevent insect problems. A significant number of people have allergies to these chemicals, and, not surprisingly, a number of quilters have developed allergies from handling fabrics with these rinses and chemicals. Pre-washing will remove these.

In the Primer, we also mentioned a coating that can be on fabric. If you can scrape something off of the surface of the fabric with your finger nail, then you probably need to wash that fabric and see what you have left!

Do you have to? No - if the chemicals don't bother you, then you don't have to pre-wash. If the quilt is a gift for someone else though, you might want to pre-wash because you won't know if they are allergic or not.

3. **Fabrics may not be color-fast so the color will “bleed” when it is washed.** Years ago this statement applied to just about every color used in the manufacture of fabric. Today it really applies mostly to reds and blues and some specialty fabrics like batiks. It’s a pretty awful feeling to piece an entire quilt together and then the first time the quilt is washed, find that your darkest colors have bled all over the other fabrics in your quilt.

If you have reds or blues or other dark colors, you may want to test for color-fastness. Cut a corner off of these dark colors and put one in a jar of very hot water. If the water begins to show the color, you have fabric that is not completely color-fast and should be washed or rinsed until the water runs clear.

Do you have to? You probably should in this case to avoid heartache after the quilt is assembled. There are some products on the market that will help to keep dye from running from one fabric to another but it would be safer to pre-wash than to have to always remember to use specialty products when the quilt is washed.

4. **New fabrics have “look” that may be shiny.** This is usually related to the chemicals mentioned in #2. Pre-washing will probably remove the shiny look and that may change how you feel about the fabric. If the fabric looks faded after it has been washed the print may be less distinct and you may not want to use that particular fabric in your quilt. This is especially true of fabrics purchased in discount or chain stores.

Do you have to? No, but you might be disappointed the first time the quilt is washed if it no longer has the sheen on certain fabrics or if a print that you were trying to feature is now faded.

How do I pre-wash?

There are almost as many suggestions about this as there are different fabric patterns in a quilt store! For beginning quilters, here are some suggestions to make this as simple as possible:

1. **Wash your fabrics the way the finished quilt will be washed.** In other words, if this is a baby quilt that will be washed in hot soapy water, your fabrics should be washed in hot, soapy water. Separate out the colors so that you don’t have to worry about one color bleeding on to another in the pre-wash. There are some specialty products on the market for washing quilts but if you aren’t going to use those all the time on the finished product, don’t use them here.
2. **Run a short cycle on your machine.** If your washing machine has one, run the shortest cycle so you aren’t wasting a lot of time on this step. Four or five minutes of agitating in hot soapy water is enough.
3. **Run the shortest, most gentle spin cycle on your machine.** Your fabric has raw edges and a long, strong spin cycle is going to fray and tangle the edges of your fabric. Spinning is not all that important to the pre-wash issue - it merely prepares your fabric for the drying cycle.
4. **Dry in the dryer.** It is often the heat from the dryer that causes the shrinkage. Using the dryer in the pre-wash stage will take care of some (and hopefully all) of the shrinkage that is going to occur with the fabric. Hanging the fabric out to dry helps it keep its shape but doesn’t do anything for the shrinkage issue.

Have you ever seen what a yard of fabric looks like when it's washed and dried by machine?

Yes and it's pretty ugly. The raw edges will have frayed and those frayed edges have most likely tangled in the process. The dried fabric is all wrinkly because all the sizing, etc. is gone now. It has to be trimmed and ironed and that's a lot of work before you ever start cutting or sewing!

One tip to help control the fraying during pre-wash is to cut the raw edges with pinking shears before putting them in the washer.

Another tip is to fold the fabric in fourths and place a safety pin in it to prevent it from unfolding. Wash and dry the fabric this way (be absolutely certain that your pins can't rust!). You still have to iron but the fraying won't be as bad.

A third tip is to use a separate little laundry bag for each piece of fabric (like a small lingerie bag) - the fabric can't toss around inside a bag as much as when it is floating free in the machine.

There may still be some fraying of the edges - you can just trim this off with a pair of scissors.

What if this is a wall hanging that won't get washed?

Yippee! You are fairly safe on all counts (except the one for allergies!). If this is just going to be decorative and rarely if ever washed, don't bother pre-washing!

What about the squares we use for embroidery?

If you haven't pre-washed other parts of your quilt you may not need to pre-wash the squares for the embroidery. On the hand, once you have embroidered your squares and assembled your quilt, you aren't going to be happy if the fabric shrinks when it's washed because your embroidery will now be all puckered.

This is one area that I will make an outright recommendation: **pre-wash this fabric and press it before you do your embroidery.** This could save you a lot of heartache later on.

Speaking of Pressing Fabric

Most people I know hate to iron. I thoroughly understand and tell everyone that the iron is one of the appliances that uses the most energy in the home. Therefore I only iron once a year and then only if I have to - I want to be as "green" as possible and save energy!

In quilting, there is a need to keep wrinkles out of your work and, later on, you will be pressing your seams as we assemble the quilt. Notice here that I keep saying "pressing" instead of "ironing" - there is a big difference.

When you iron something, you push the iron back and forth across the fabric letting the weight of the iron and the downward push of your hand do the work. This gets rid of wrinkles but it may stretch your fabric, particularly if you have a heavy hand.

When you press in quilting, you want to develop a technique where you set the iron down and let it do it's thing, then pick it up and put it down again in a different place. The difference here is that you are not sliding the iron around on the surface of the fabric, so there will be less stretching.

If you pre-wash, you will need to press your fabric. Practice doing the put-it-down, pick-it-up-and-put-it-in-a-different-place technique. I admit it will take a little longer but it's better for your fabric

One nice thing about pressing your fabric: it lets you get acquainted with the fabric. I know that may sound silly but if there is anything wrong with the fabric (a tiny run, a print that isn't exact, an uneven quality of any kind) you will see it as you press your fabric. If pre-washing has removed the shine or faded the print, you will also see that as you press your fabric. This is the time to inspect it and make sure nothing gets into your quilt without you noticing it!

So - do I pre-wash or not?

It really is up to you. If you have purchased your fabrics in a quilt store and feel sure that you have the highest quality fabrics that won't shrink, bleed or fade, you don't need to pre-wash. If you aren't sure about some or all of your fabrics, you probably do need to pre-wash just to be safe. I do recommend that you pre-wash the squares for the embroidery to prevent shrinking after the quilt is assembled.

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