

All Quilt Fabric is NOT the Same!

By TK Harrison

When most of us were struggling through basic math through advanced math in our youth, we often thought and said that it was ridiculous to learn all of the mathematical equations because we'd never use them after high school or college. No way, use math in 'real life'? Naahhhhh

Wrong!

Understanding math is used constantly in one's life - any kind of shopping but most especially grocery shopping, budgeting, money matters and quilt fabric. Why quilt fabric? Is easier to look at a bigger picture by using bed sheets as an example. The craze these days is Egyptian cotton sheets. What makes them so special is the thread count. That doesn't mean you have to get out your magnifying glass and literally count the threads because someone has already done that for you! Close your eyes and feel an inexpensive 100% cotton sheet from a discount store in one hand and compare it, in the other hand, to a 600 count 100% Egyptian quilt. Every single time, you will be able to tell the difference between the two. Getting back to quilting, purchase a fat quarter from a discount store, one from a sewing store (such as Joann's or Hancock's) and then a fat quarter from a quilt shop. Although most people don't have three hands, continue with just your touch sensation. Again, nearly all people will be able to truly feel what a difference the thread count makes in those three different fat quarters.

That's *not* to say that you cannot make quilts from any of those cotton fabrics! Far from it. You can buy fabric at a discount store and quilt to your heart's content. But if you want your quilt to last through repeated usage and laundering, go with the higher thread count quilt cotton.

Quilt cotton also comes in varying thread weights, depending on who manufactures the fabric. True batik quilt fabric uses a higher thread count than quality quilt cotton. This is evident to you in the feeling but both can create beautiful quilts that last a long time.

Another big difference in low-end (discount) quilt cotton and high-end quilt fabric is the fabric bleed. To test this theory, pour a cup of water into two separate white kitchen bowls. Cut two 10" squares of a red quilt fabric, one from the low-end fabric and one from the high-end fabric. Put these squares in their respective water dishes. Stir them around a bit and leave them for an hour or two. When you come back to them, is the water clear? Or has the fabric bled and turned the water red? Danger lurks in that red water!

Additionally, pay attention to the sizing or other chemicals that are used on quilt fabric. This test can actually be seen and felt in nearly all cotton quilt fabric - but do your feel and wash tests to see what you can see. If you test different fabrics in water and then dry them, will they remain stiff? Or will the washing of them get rid of the chemicals? A larger thread count fabric, such as a batik, may still feel stiff - that's what happens in the making of batik fabrics.

Read the labels, know where you purchase quality quilt fabric and don't be afraid to use your senses to test your quilt fabric. Your final test should be in the end-product. If you make a quilt and wash it, will it cover you with a soft joy or a heavy feeling? Will it stand the test of time and the washing machine? And will it be around for a few generations to enjoy, without losing its shape or have the seams coming apart? You get to be the judge of that!

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