by Rosemary Hill

Wire. When many knitters hear that word, they involuntarily rub their hands and hide them away in their pockets. But those of us who have knitted with wire know that it doesn't need to be painful. Sure, it doesn't have the give of wool; it's more like knitting with linen or hemp. But once you learn how to handle it, knitted and crocheted wire yields beautiful jewelry that you cannot duplicate with other methods. And best of all? You can create a beautiful piece in less than a day. But how does the mild mannered knitter brave the new world of wire and beads? Well. There are a few things you need to know first, and then it's all a breeze. So to help you on your way to becoming a veteran wire knitter, I've put together a few tips and bits of information that will get you started with some of the basics.

Wire Gauge: One of the first things you will probably say to yourself when reading the materials list is "what the heck is wire gauge?" Wire gauge is a measurement of the thickness of wire. The larger the number, the thinner the wire. For instance, 20 gauge wire is usually used for earring wires. I like knitting with 30 or 32 gauge wire doubled. It is easy on your hands and easy to form stitches. Your piece will have the strength of a piece knitted using a thicker wire, but you will have gotten there in a more pleasant manner!

Different Wires/ Metals: Different metals are, well...different. Although I love sterling silver wire, it is not what I generally use, and it is not what I suggest for the beginner. When I began knitting with wire, I purchased some 32-gauge no-name beading wire from Fire Mountain Gems. The price was right: about $2 for a package of two spools. I swatched to my heart's content, not worrying terribly about wasting wire. It is a bit thin, but when doubled keeps its shape beautifully. (In the end, my thrifty nature won out and I turned all of my swatches into the "Mess-up Necklace" in my new book).

After I had had my fill of no-name wire, I tried Artistic WIre and realized what I had been missing. At about $4 a spool, it is much more expensive than the no-name, but wow! What a difference! My very favorite is the silver plated copper wire in non-tarnish silver. The copper core is very flexible and bends smoothly, allowing you to make your stitches easily. It is a pleasure, not only to see the results, but also to knit it! This wire can even be tinked if you are very careful, don't pull too hard, and only have a few stitches to pull out. After a lot of trial and error, I moved on to sterling silver. It succumbs more easily to metal fatigue than the other two metals mentioned, so it is a good idea to try sterling only after you have had some practice. Fine silver, which has more silver content than sterling, is softer and has less spring to it. It also does not fatigue as easily. Both are lovely knitted up, of course. When you purchase sterling or fine silver wire, be sure to buy "dead soft."

Metal Fatigue: Metal fatigue is a term used for the failure of metal, often after it has been pulled, pushed, kinked, bent or otherwise folded, spindled or mutilated past its breaking point. There are other reasons for metal to fail, but since we will not be building a space shuttle, I think we shall move on.

All of the wire you will be using has been annealed. Annealing is a heating process that renders metal soft and workable, and allows you more latitude before metal fatigue sets in. As you work any metal, it grows harder. If you work it too much, it becomes brittle and breaks. The Artistic Wire is the softest of the wires I have mentioned, and it is a breeze to knit with. I have never had it snap. The no-name wire takes some working to snap. The fine silver is similar to the no-name wire. But the sterling, even "dead soft" (the term for the least hardened of all) sterling can be very snappy. It does not like to be reworked, so it is best to have experimented with other metals before trying a project with it.

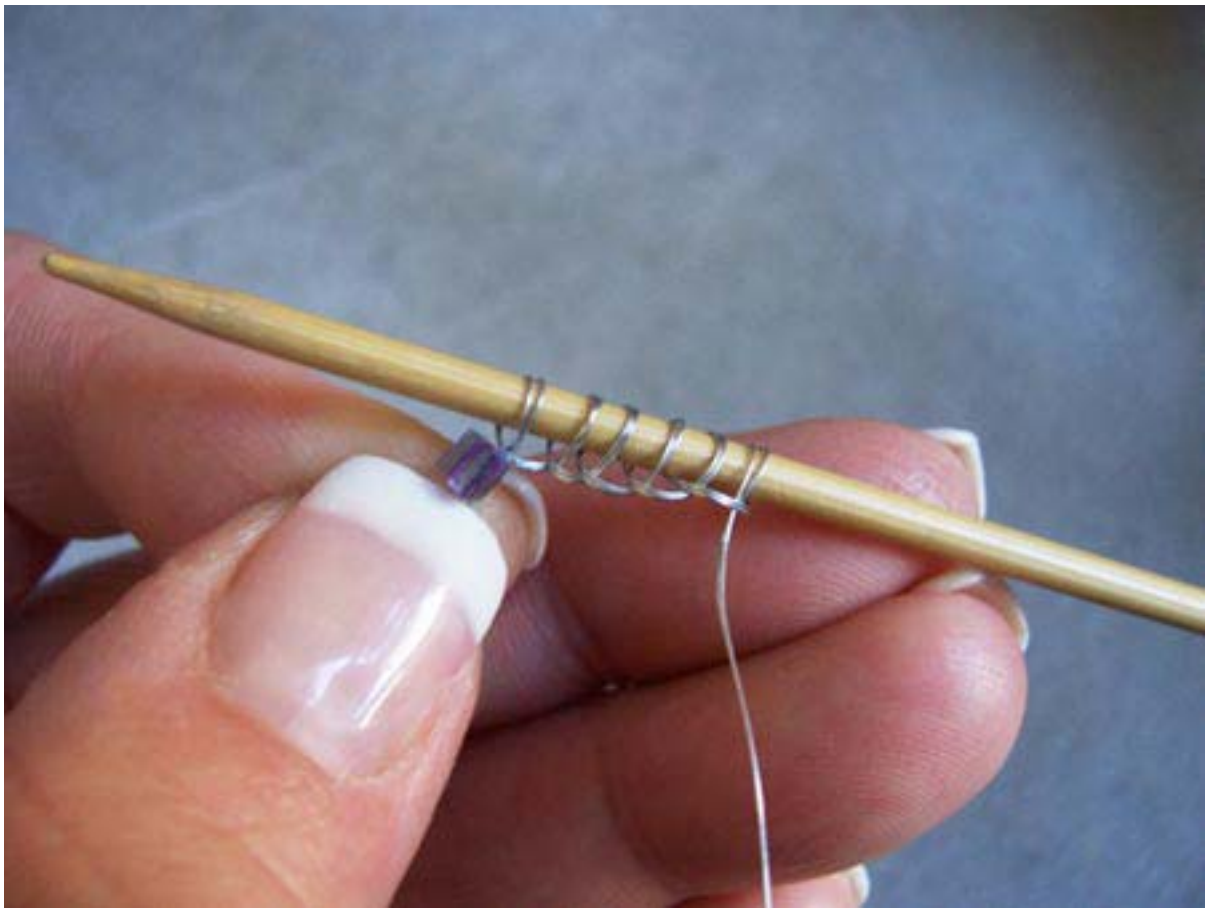
Tools: Generally, when I knit wire, I use double pointed bamboo needles. The wire does faintly scar the needles after prolonged use, but not badly. I can still use my dedicated wire needles for other projects if need be. I also use metal dpns, and my favorites are the Inox grey needles that have a little grab to them. Another fun method of wire knitting is using a knitting doll, or "spool knitter." With this little gizmo, you will be able to knit a tube of wire, into which you can insert beads and other found objects. I have a collection of sea glass that I've been eyeing.

Bead Sizes: There are a couple of basic bead sizing systems that you will want to know when you set out to embellish your project. Seed beads are categorized by how many beads fit end to end on one inch of beading line. 6/0 beads are fairly large (as seed beads go) and are usually what I use in my projects. Other beads are measured in mm. A size 6/0 seed bead is a little over 2mm. I generally use smaller beads because they stay put better after knit and there is less stress on the wire.

The Basics

Spool management: To prevent wire tangling and runaway spools, I like to keep spools in small ziploc plastic bags, especially when knitting with the wire doubled. Use one bag per spool, and leave hardly any room between the spool and the bag closure.

Casting on: I like to use a lark's head knot (as used in macrame, and seen above) to begin so that there are no visible knots. The lark's head will be the first two stitches cast on and then the best cast-on is the plain backwards loop.



Tension: It is best to hold wire in your hand somewhat looser than you would hold wool. If you have knit with cotton or linen before, you can use similar tension to those fibers.

Knitting: I have found that using exaggerated movements is helpful in wire knitting. Instead of knitting with the tips of your needles, for example, push the needle all the way through each stitch. This allows you to keep the knitting loose enough to work easily.

Placing beads: I always pre-string beads and place them between stitches. When knitting with two strands of wire, it is only necessary to string beads on one of the strands. Where beads are placed on edges, it is often necessary to push and pull the beads into place. Happily, though, wire stays where you put it! Alternatively, beads with fairly large holes may be placed over the stitch using a crochet hook. I wouldn't suggest this with the smaller ones, though, as the wire may break under stress.

Blocking: As you knit, you will want to pull and push the wire "fabric" into shape with your fingers. Do this often; I finger block everything into place at least once a row. When you are finished knitting, it is much more difficult to block it if you have not been blocking as you go.

Binding off: A normal bind off works perfectly with wire. As usual, do not bind off too tightly, but it also doesn't need to be extra loose.

End management: Wire ends are simple to "weave" in: merely wrap the end around a stitch and clip.

Adding findings: Clasps, earring wires, jump rings and the like are called "findings." When you wish to attach a finding, it is important to secure it properly so that you do not put undue stress on thin wire. My designs are engineered to distribute stress over a larger area and cut down on metal fatigue so that the piece will last longer. The necklace shown here uses a ribbon closure to side-step this issue completely. The pieces in my book employ several different methods of closure.

Care: Although wire knitting is not fine jewelry, your pieces will still last quite awhile with proper care. The most important thing to remember is not to crush, scrunch or otherwise crumple your piece.