

By Clara Parkes

Socks have a thankless job. They spend their days shoved deep inside a shoe. They try desperately to hold onto our foot and not slip around as they get walked on, all the while trying to breathe and not be too overwhelmed by the heat and moisture given off by the foot. Oh, and they still need to stay pretty just in case you hike up your pant-leg to show them off to a fellow knitter.

It takes a special yarn to be able to handle this responsibility. Those yarns that are up to the challenge will reward you with enduring beauty and, depending on the yarn, a possibility for subtle intrigue as well.

I like intrigue, which is why I chose a sock pattern to swatch for this column. Chrissy Gardiner's [Buttercup](#) socks feature a sweet, U-shaped buttercup motif running down the leg and the top of the foot, bordered on either side with a single purl rib column. There's enough going on to keep you entertained, but not so much that it overwhelms your eyes or conceals any unique qualities in the yarn you're using.

We begin with the gold standard of sock yarns, Louet Gems.



Mind you it doesn't have nylon, and it's composed of only two plies. Yet a very large percentage of the hand-dyed sock yarns on the market are made from this base yarn. It is a superwash Merino whose springy two plies give shadow and three-dimensionality to your knitting. I chose a solid color to accentuate the qualities of the yarn itself, and Chrissy's stitch pattern took on a beautifully rippled, lacy look.



Next I played with another perennial sock standard, the plump and springy Socks That Rock Mediumweight. This three-ply superwash Merino yarn has been plied very tightly, the plies almost perpendicular to the direction of the yarn, to produce an extremely energetic fabric.



The three-ply structure produced much more rounded stitches in which the k2togs and ssks stood out in a very high-relief, three-dimensional way. While Tina Newton makes some extraordinary variegated colors, I chose a faintly semisolid colorway for this swatch so that it wouldn't overpower the stitches.



You don't quite realize what a different tightness of twist and ply can make until you see the next swatch, which I knit from Lorna's Laces Shepherd Sock. The four plies in this yarn have been spun and plied very smoothly, with only moderate twist.



It's still strong and well-constructed enough for socks — especially with its 20% nylon content — but it delivers a smoother, more serene face for the stitches. Still, the CDD at the base of each U has a slight pucker that lifts the tip off the surface, like the scales on an upside-down asparagus tip. For this swatch I bumped up the variegation just a hint by using a color that drifts from pink to yellow to white. (It's my colorway, Clara's Garden — sorry, I couldn't resist!)



This pattern needs a reasonably harmonious color variegation to keep the pattern from being obscured. If you were to work with stronger contrasting colors — ones that went from red to blue, for example — you'd obscure a great deal of the stitchwork (and your time). Some people like that effect, others don't.

So far, all the yarns I've talked about had a superwash Merino foundation. The challenge with sock yarn is that it needs to have spring and bounce in order to hug the leg. Spring and bounce are two qualities that wool embodies best. Thanks to the miracles of modern spinning and fiber technology, we have some beautiful non-wool sock yarn alternatives out there now. I swatched Panda Cotton, an intriguing blend from Crystal Palace Yarns that mixes 59% bamboo, 25% cotton, and 16% elastic nylon.

At first glance the yarn looks normal enough, but when you look more closely you'll see that it's got a bit more going on. It is composed of four strands, each of which is composed of two standard strands of fiber and one nearly invisible wisp of fiber. Those strands are wrapped tightly around the wisp in a way that creates a springy strand that is rendered even springier by being plied to a near vertical degree with the other plies.



All those multiple layers of plies—combined with the 16% elastic nylon—give you a well-wearing yarn that also has bounce and spring, while you still get to enjoy the comfortable qualities of the cotton.

This yarn delivered the smoothest, most well-rounded fabric of the bunch, although it was slightly denser than the Merino-based yarns. It rendered the U bases in slightly lower-relief than the other

yarns. But whereas those Merino yarns were primarily matte, the bamboo component in Panda Cotton introduced a delicate striated shimmer in the finished fabric.

For me, this exercise helped affirm a cardinal truth in knitting: the yarn really does make a difference. Even if you want to knit the same pattern over and over again, you can swap one yarn for another and get fresh new results.

Which yarn will you pick?