



By Kay Gardiner and Ann Shayne

Another batch of good questions and good solutions from the Problem Ladies!

The Value of Humans, Explained

How can I so consistently miss the obvious when it comes to knitting? For example, I recently learned (from Bonne Marie Burns of chicknits.com) that instead of driving myself crazy trying to figure out how to reverse shaping on the fronts, I should just use the shaping for the back! That is brilliant. And Obvious.

Emeselle

In this age of tweets and texts and video tutorials, we forget that knitters used to learn lots of clever tricks by sitting beside other knitters and waiting for them to spill the secrets of the craft. The person who first realized that the shaping on the back of a cardigan necessarily echoes the shaping of the fronts would have shared it with someone sitting next to her. In fact, she would have said something like, “Hey! Guess what I just realized? We don’t need to reverse the stinkin’ shaping directions ever again!” But this same knitter might not consider the tip worthy of sharing in a book, or a blog, or even a tweet. Our advice: knit with others. Share your tips, even if they seem really obvious. They’re not obvious if you don’t know about them.

Hints for Better Stitch Counting

I am a good knitter, but I am a terrible counter. Is there a simpler way to count other than 1, 2, 3, 4?

Rox

A simpler way to count than 1, 2, 3? We can’t think of one. But there are definitely ways to avoid driving yourself crazy counting and recounting stitches when a project requires a lot of them on the needles. The Problem Ladies never count 1, 2, 3; they always count 2, 4, 6. This cuts counting time by a whopping 50 percent, and somehow seems more accurate to boot. (If you can count by threes, more power to ya! Two-thirds reduction in counting time!)

When a project requires casting on more than a hundred stitches, it saves time and irritation if you place a marker on the needle every 50 stitches or every 100 stitches, so that you can count in chunks. This will also make it much easier to locate a dropped stitch. If you are supposed to have 400 stitches but you only have 399, and no markers, it will take a lot more looking to find the dropped stitch than if you count each of your sections of 50 and notice that one of them only has 49. (Hint: the dropped stitch is in that section.)

If you're knitting in a color or stitch pattern that has distinctive repeats, once the repeated pattern becomes visible, counting is no longer necessary. You'll know right away if a stitch is missing or extra, because the repeat won't do right anymore. So never fudge a repeat that has an extra stitch by knitting two together, or making a stitch if you're short one. Carefully examine the stitches you've worked in this row, and if necessary the previous row, and figure out How the @\$# Did This Happen. You will find it! And when you find it, we guarantee that it will be something boneheaded, like a spontaneous yarnover, or a stitch that got stuck to another stitch.

The Embarrassing Confession of One of the Problem Ladies (Not Ann)

What is your favorite provisional cast-on?

Andrea

Andrea, Andrea, Andrea. Your innocent question is going to destroy the reputation of the Problem Ladies. We may never knit in this town again. We will be dragged bodily to the outskirts of Knitopia, with nothing but a bag of furry synthetics and a crochet hook, and left to die of heartbreak and exposure.

Our crime: we do not like most provisional cast-on methods. The classic crochet cast-on is touted as the simplest method. You chain a bunch of crochet stitches in waste yarn, and then pick up stitches in the back "bumps" of the crochet stitches in the real yarn. This works great when you only need to cast on a few stitches. But when you need to provisionally cast on a very large number of stitches (for example for a shawl that is going to be edged, later, with applied i-cord) that long chain of crochet stitches quickly becomes wormy and unpleasant. Worse, if don't do it correctly, it's impossible to "unzip" the crochet cast-on, and after all that futzing, you end up with a provisional cast-on that is not provisional.

Here's what Kay does. (Kay is outing herself as the offender here, to shield Ann from a mob of wrathful knitters bearing torches.) Are you ready to hear what Kay does? Can you HANDLE hearing what Kay does?

Kay casts on using waste yarn. Just a regular old cast-on. Nothing provisional about it. After casting on in the waste yarn, she starts knitting with the real yarn. Weeks, months or lifetimes later, after completing the many thousands of stitches that are in a shawl with a cast-on of 398 stitches, when the pattern says that it's time to "undo the provisional cast-on," Kay takes a pair of small, sharp embroidery scissors and . . . cuts out the cast-on stitches.

Kay does this v.e.r.y. c.a.r.e.f.u.l.l.y. She cuts only the stitches that are in the waste yarn, and she praises heaven if the waste yarn is super-contrasty to the real yarn. It is impossible to overstate how careful Kay is when she is doing this. Kay does this with the realization that if she accidentally snips the real yarn, she is going to have an almighty mess on her hands, and that there's not a knitter in the universe who will feel sorry for her, because it's her own damn fault.

Kay recommends that you do as she says, and not as she does. Learn a provisional cast-on

method that you can live with. Cast on provisionally when instructed to do so, and keep the embroidery scissors far away from your knitting.

Novelty Yarns: When the Thrill Is Gone

I acquired a large amount of novelty yarn in my stash from the early days of my knitting adventure. It evokes a sigh of disappointment every time I come across it. I can't quite bring myself to throw it away. Any thoughts? **Adrienne**

Yarn is only stuff. Most novelty yarn is bad stuff. It will feel very cleansing to rid yourself of the bad mojo of novelty yarn, or any yarn that you no longer feel good about owning. Novelty yarn is a very extreme example of stuff we don't need that is holding us back from realizing our true potential. The Problem Ladies have had good success offloading novelty yarn on school art teachers. It is fun to go to the Middle School Art Show and see your nasty old Spangle-Ishus Bulky turned into Conceptual Art.

Gifting Etiquette

This is a hybrid knitting and etiquette question. I really love to knit and wear interesting scarves, not too over the top, but scarves that stand out from the store-bought type. However after a while, I rotate them out of current wear. Friends have admired them while I am knitting or wearing them. How best does one gift a scarf that has been admired after one has been wearing it for a season? I have a lovely purple alpaca lace scarf waiting to go to its new home. It seems tacky to say "Hi, I'm sick of this but I thought you could use it."

Kathy

The Problem Ladies are charmingly old-fashioned on the subject of gifts. In our view, the only way to avoid the appearance of dumping a cast-off to a friend is to gift it immediately upon receipt of the admiring comment. A person gives you a sincere compliment on your scarf. You say, "You like this? Really? Thank you!" Then take it off your neck and put it on the neck of your delighted pal. Alternatively, if you have a scarf in your collection that you know a close friend loves, tell her you're ready to let it go and ask if she'd like it. But the instant, impulsive gift is a lovely gesture of generosity. And you know you're going to keep knitting scarves!

Overcoming Fear of Sockweight

How do I overcome my fear of knitting with yarn smaller than worsted weight? I always have to go down two needle sizes to get gauge, so I think I'm avoiding using small needles for garments that will take forever to knit.

debd94

The physical laws of knitting are mysterious and not necessarily consistent. A knitter who has trouble getting gauge with prescribed needles in a heavier yarn may have no trouble hitting it the first time with sock yarn and small needles. You'll never know until you try. Who knows, you may

have naturally correct gauge in lighter weight yarn!

Washing a Handknit: Our Thoughts

What are the best methods/materials/incantations to use for washing/cleaning handknits of all fibers and fiber combinations? Oh, and is there a water-quality-equalizing system/method to remove this as a variable in the above question? I find a lot of conflicting information about this.

Quinn

The Problem Ladies tend to ignore statements like “dry clean only” on yarn labels. Most natural fibers and blends of natural fibers with each other, or with synthetics, can be washed safely. Washing is better for the environment, the fiber, and your pocketbook than dry cleaning, and the precious garment does not leave your custody and control. We suspect that most “dry clean only” labels are there to protect the yarn maker from complaints from people who have been careless in their washing methods.

The Problem Ladies’ recipe for washing handknits is consistent across all fibers and fiber combinations: tepid water plus gentle cleanser. Products intended for washing handknits, like Soak and Eucalan, are excellent, but if you don’t have them on hand, a tiny amount of a good shampoo (half or less of what you’d use to wash your hair) works fine. (Do avoid detergents of any kind.) Put a squirt of the chosen cleanser into a clean sink, fill generously with tepid water (not hot, not even warm, but not ice-cold), and put the handknit in for a soak. Do not agitate or swish the handknit very much, especially if it is a feltable fiber like untreated wool or mohair. Just let it soak until it seems clean—this can take minutes or longer. Rinsing is not necessary unless the washing water is very sudsy. If you rinse, take the same care not to manhandle the garment. Gently squeeze out most of the water; take your time. Then roll up the item in a clean, dry towel and stand on it in your bare feet. This does wonders removing the remaining water, and leaving you with a barely damp handknit. Dry the handknit flat, out of direct sunlight. (If it’s a lace shawl, it’s going to need to be blocked all over again. Sorry.)

There are a few yarns—denim cotton and superwash sock yarns come to mind—that can tolerate, or even thrive on, rougher treatment. Some yarn makers have lines, often targeted for kids’ knits, that they advertise as being machine washable and dryable. But most handknits will last longer and look better if you give them the spa-like pampering. It might not seem fair, but your handknits should live better than you do.



Knit Strong! Keep those cards and letters coming in to problemladies@twistcollective.com