

by Clara Parkes

Anne Hanson's lace patterns make my heart go pitter-pat. She has a talent for creating fine, intricate sculptures in which open space defines as much of the pattern as the yarn surrounding it. Icicle Dream is yet another beautiful manifestation of this gift and one that presents some intriguing yarn challenges too.

Right at the beginning, Anne establishes her ideal yarn parameters. She gives us six different yarn recommendations that fall

on the indie-dyed, semisolid side of the yarn world. All are two-ply and are composed of 100% Merino. And if that weren't enough of a hint, she ends her yarn suggestions with, "...or any springy, laceweight yarn with 400 yards per 2 ounces." I made those words my challenge, seeking out yarns that would maintain the springiness Anne envisioned while adding other fibers to the mix. All are two-ply and advertised as lace weight.

First, the word "springy." In yarnspeak, springy laceweight yarn means Merino or Cormo, Polwarth, or any other of the high-crimp finewools. For the sake of commercially available yarns, I chose Merino as my base fiber.



I began with a 100% Merino so that I could see and feel the kind of bounce Anne intended. In a world of nearly infinite lace-weight Merino yarn choices, I chose something a little special. It's a two-ply superwash Merino lambswool that was spun in Yorkshire, England, and then naturally dyed in the French Pyrenées by a woman named Andie Luijk. She sells a multitude of exquisite colors to both embroiderers and knitters under the Renaissance Dyeing label. The two plies are actually a

little more loose and relaxed than some of the ultra-springy Merinos out there, but I found it not only suitably springy for this design, but also incredibly strong, soft, and ethereal. It also had a surprising amount of luster for Merino, which is a low-luster fiber.



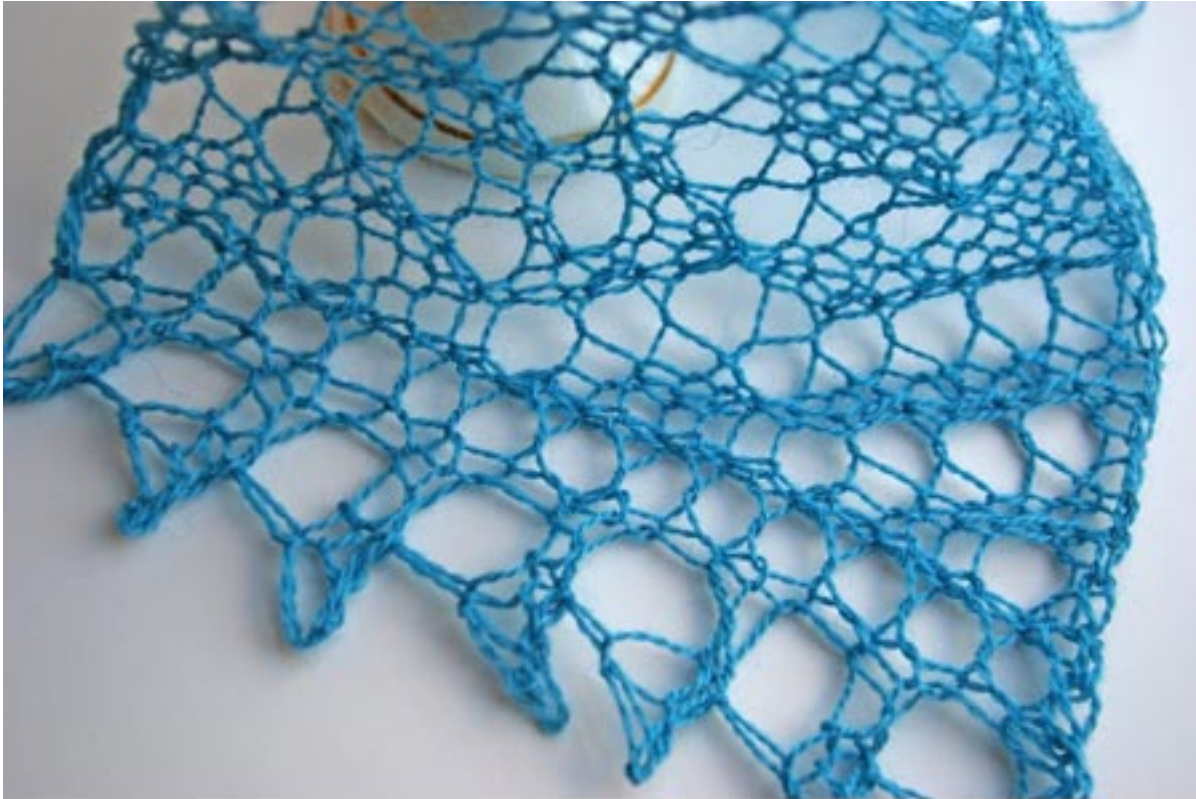
Renaissance Dyeing
100% Merino

A note about the photographs. When working with lace-weight yarns and swatches, you have to get very close to capture any subtleties of texture, halo, and sheen. For this reason, I kept a very close focus on all the pictures. I wanted to capture the traits of each fiber and not necessarily to get the exact same gauge of the pattern. Before you begin, be sure to make your own gauge swatches and adjust your needle size as necessary.

Our Merino swatch showed us what Anne wants us to use. But what happens if we move away from purest, bounciest Merino and try adding other fibers into the mix? Blending fibers gives the yarn other qualities that Merino may not have—more luster, for example, or a great halo and better drape. My blending rule was simple: The yarns always had to maintain 50% Merino, which is (in theory) a sufficient enough percentage to maintain bounce in the yarn.



I began with a 50% Merino/50% baby alpaca blend, called Peruvian Baby Lace Merino, from Elann. Baby alpaca tends to be the finest and crimpiest of the breed, but it still gives you a hint of the glossy sheen and fluid drape for which alpaca is best known. An extremely fine and smooth yarn, Peruvian Baby Lace Merino has a tight twist and close ply structure that give strength, body, and bounce to the fabric. It has a hint of a halo but with a strong underlying luster.

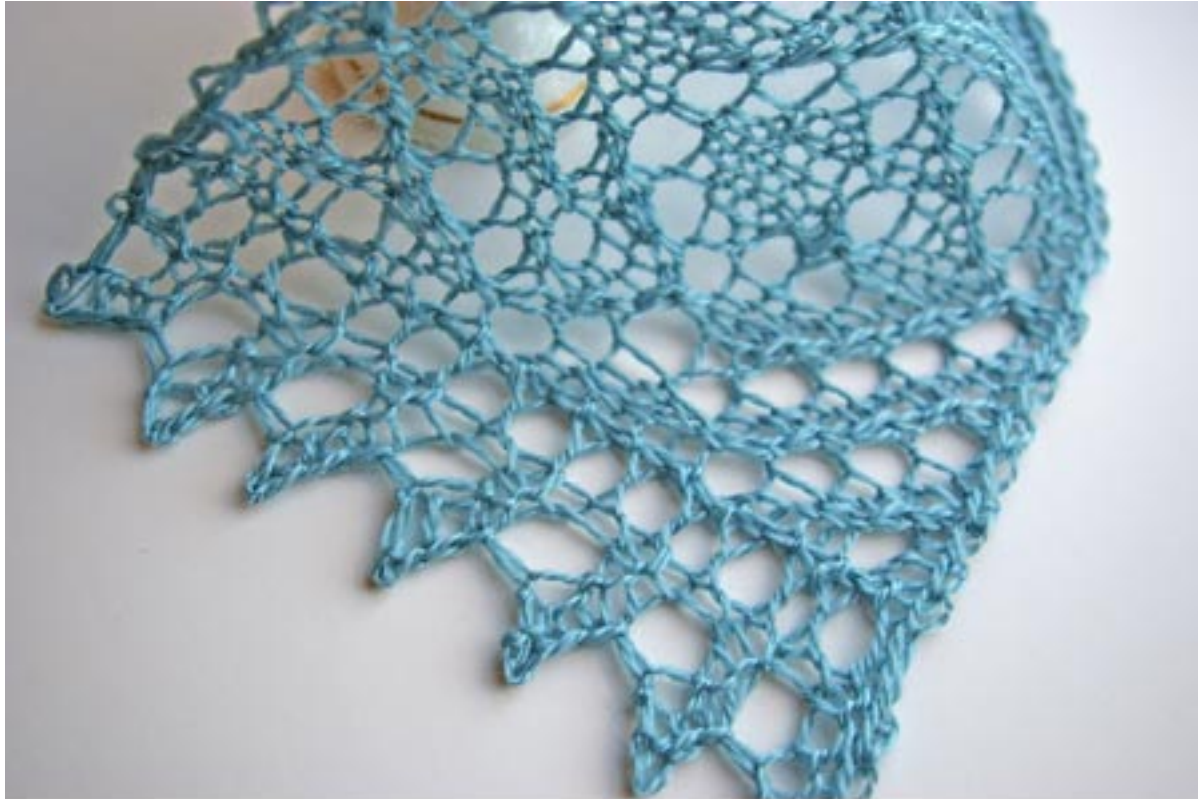


Elann Peruvian Baby Lace Merino
50% Merino / 50% Baby Alpaca

Next, I sought a fiber that would lend the kind of sparkle that the words “Icicle Dream” evoke while still adhering to Anne’s springy guidelines. I began with Tencel, a manufactured fiber made from the regenerated cellulose of tree pulp. Tencel has an exceptional sheen to it, but it also has no crimp or scale structure—which means that even at 50%, it can be rather dense. For this swatch I chose Colrain Lace, a beautiful 50/50 blend of Merino and Tencel from Valley Yarns



The most substantial of the lace yarns I swatched, Colrain Lace delivers a marvelous flowing gloss and sense of substance, as well as incredibly clear stitch definition. Consider this yarn if you want your stole to have a stronger personality and greater presence on your shoulders.

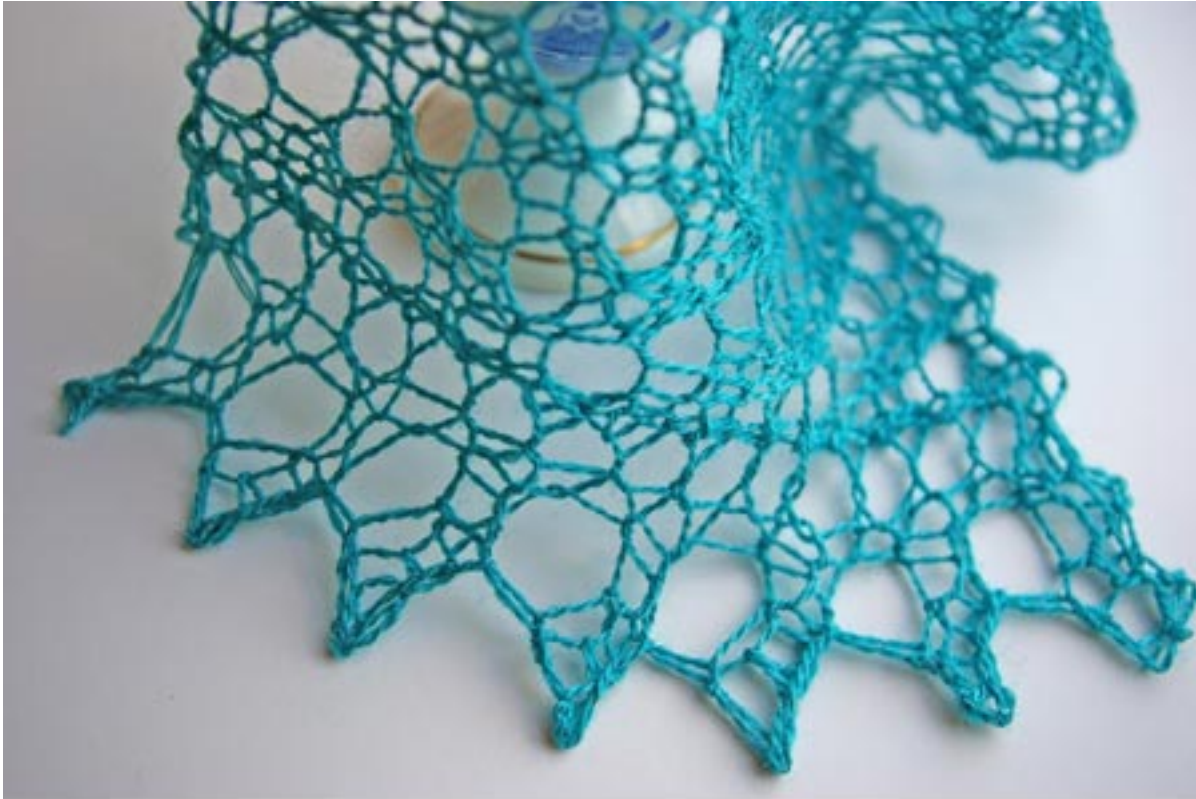


Valley Yarns Colrain Lace
50% Merino / 50% Tencel

And then we have silk, the ultimate sparkle fiber with an exceptionally smooth and slippery hand. On its own, silk can truly test the “springy” concept. But when blended at 50 percent, it adds an irresistible degree of fluidity, drape, and luster to lace. We’re lucky to have a plethora of such yarns on the market. I chose a perennial classic and one of my personal favorites, Helen’s Lace from Lorna’s Laces.



Just a hint heavier than the Renaissance Dyeing and Elann yarns, Helen's Lace carries the bounce of a pure Merino while delivering the undeniable shimmer of silk. It blocks to near perfection, rendering intricate lace patterns with architectural clarity.

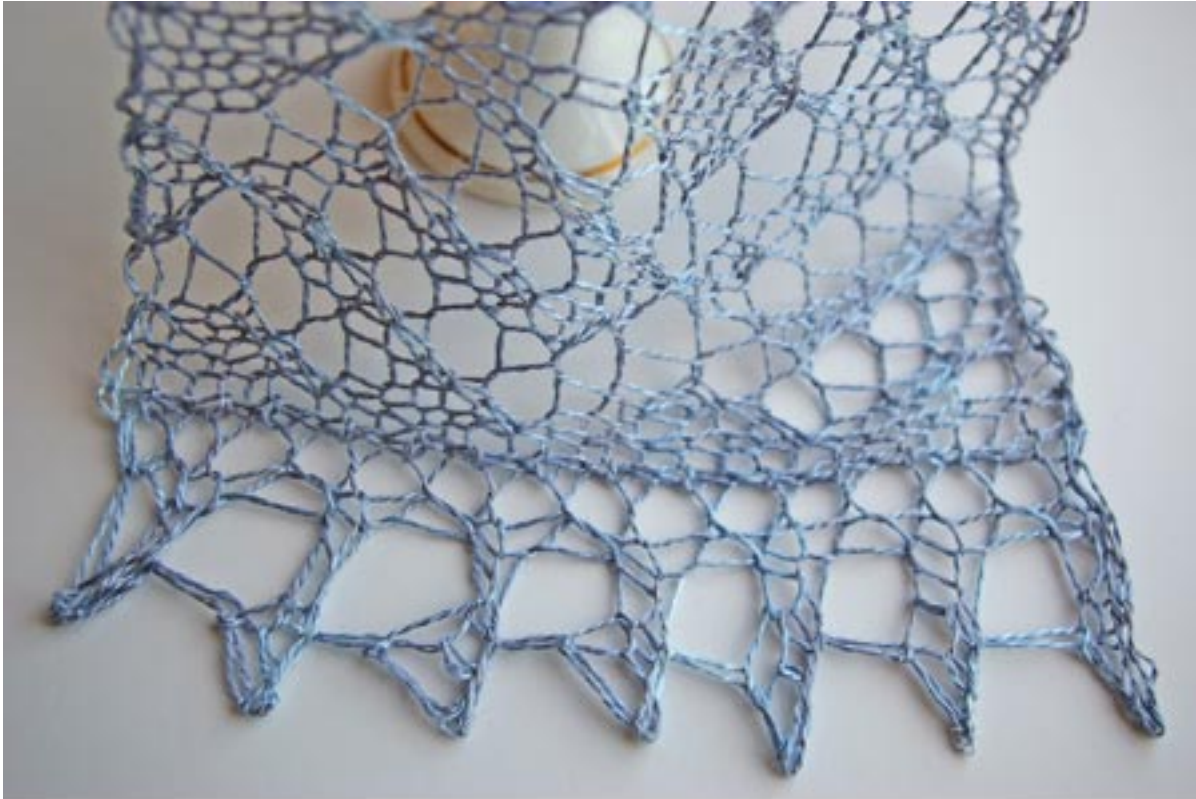


Lorna's Laces Helen's Lace
50% Merino / 50% Silk

Come to think of it, that silk was pretty nice. What if we pass on Anne's advice and try a 100% silk lace yarn? Say, Silk Thread 2 from Blue Moon Fiber Arts? For those who only know Blue Moon for its brightly variegated Socks That Rock yarn (whose variegation would completely obscure the lace patterning in this stole), take heed—Tina Newton also provides a Shaded Solids line of colors that are splendidly suited for this pattern.



As soon as I cast on, I was immediately reminded of silk's complete lack of elasticity. The undeniably splendid luster definitely conveys the ice and frost formations more sparkingly than any other yarn I swatched, but I missed the stretchiness that Merino adds. The yarn was still flexible enough to accommodate the multitude of K2togs and SSKs in this pattern, though.



Blue Moon Fiber Arts Silk Thread 2
100% Silk

In swatching this final yarn, I realized that part of the benefit of “springy” yarns is that they maintain a high degree of depth and three-dimensionality in their stitches. After blocking, the fabric in my 100% silk swatch was as flat and fluid as a sheet of paper. It was still beautiful, but perhaps not necessarily what Anne had envisioned. Then again, one of the greatest joys of knitting is that we each get to swatch until we get the results we envision.

Happy swatching!