

By Kay Gardiner and Ann Shayne

Updating a Vintage Pattern: For the Strong of Heart

Dear Problem Ladies,

I have several vintage knitting patterns I would like to knit. They specify the type and brand of yarn and how many ounces and/or skeins are required. The yarn no longer exists and I have no idea of how many yards were in the specified weight. Here is an example: a “40” vest calls for five 4 oz skeins of 2 ply Sheepswool at 5 stitches to the inch. Is there a way, without making my head hurt, to calculate the yardage needed for a current yarn? This has been vexing me for weeks, so I hope you have an un-vex for me. Thank you!

Vexed



Dear Vexed One,

If the following makes your head hurt, we are sorry. First of all, if this vintage pattern is for a snood or a bathing suit, we don't want to know. That's your business. We are dealing only with the yarn substitution and yardage estimation issues.

The easiest way to solve a problem is to discover that someone else has already solved it for you. So first, do an online search for references to the specific yarn required. Some vintage-pattern nut out there may already have attempted to substitute for this exact yarn. You can learn which yarn was tried and whether the substitution was successful or not. Of course, yarn companies love to torture knitters, so it is possible that the substitute yarn is no longer available either, but you will have made a significant step forward in the Science of Knitting. You will now be able to search online to see what people have substituted for the substitute. What fun this will be for you!

If it seems that you really are the first person to embark on this sacred mission, all you can do is make an educated guess and hunker down to some trial and error. Look on the bright side: you could become the Madame Curie of Ny-Lona Speckleply. If the stitch gauge is still in common use today (in the range of 4-7 stitches to the inch for sweaters), and the fiber is recognizable (either in the description or from peering at the daguerreotype of the pattern), try some yarns from your stash that are labeled for this gauge and are a good fiber match. It costs you nothing to swatch yarns from stash, and you might learn that there is a yarn that you love that works for the project. If you can get stitch and row gauge, or close enough, consider whether the fabric feels appropriate for the garment. Please don't go all New Age on us and ask, "What does this yarn want to be?" Yarn is not, actually, a sentient being. It doesn't want to be anything, and if it did, it couldn't tell you. It's yarn.



The stickiest part of this mission is estimating how many skeins you will need in a new yarn. If the gauge and fabric are right, there's a good chance that the ratio of yardage to weight will be similar to the original yarn, but you would be well advised to lay in extra skeins just in case. So many variables affect yardage. Look at a pattern written for the substitute yarn and see what yardage it calls for (for the same type of garment, of course). Then think about what this means for your vintage pattern. Do you need more? Do you need less?

We don't recommend sampling skeins of unknown yarns bought online; that would be too hunt-and-peck, and it smacks of desperation. But the perfect substitute yarn might be sitting on the shelf at your friendly neighborhood yarn store *right this minute*. If you have a good relationship with people at your local shop (and if not, take immediate corrective action), take them the pattern on a day when they don't have a clamoring horde in the store and see what they think. Experienced yarn people have amazing knowledge about the yarns of the past and how they compare to the yarns of today.

Tired yet? Still wanting to make this thing? Don't you want to knit a current pattern like a sensible person?



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