

by Clara Parkes

We don't always have the luxury of knitting a pattern using the yarn it specifies. Whether for aesthetic, logistical, or financial reasons, we often substitute. But choosing a different yarn can often be a source of angst. Will it give us anything remotely resembling the sweater we saw in the picture?

This column was created with that dilemma in mind. I'll pull out one gorgeous pattern from each issue, strip it down to its most prominent design element, and then look at what other kinds of yarns would be suitable for that pattern. We'll talk not only in terms of brands but in broader terms of fibers, spins, and plies.

How fitting that we begin our first column in the first Twist Collective by talking about twist: not just the twist that goes into fiber and makes yarn, but the twist that can go into stitches when we manipulate them into cables.

I've chosen Linden, a trapeze-style jacket by Véronik Avery. The interesting challenge here was the massive cable motif running along either side of the sweater opening. Cables bring stitches on top of one another as they travel back and forth, causing the fabric to double in bulk while the surrounding fabric puckers. For this reason, dense fibers and heavy yarns are generally not ideal for cable-heavy garments. Please note that all of the yarns I mention here will require a little tweaking with needle size and gauge.

Véronik used Green Mountain Spinnery's "Yarn Over" for this design. It's a fun choice in itself because the yarn is literally made using leftover wool and mohair from other mill runs and dye lots. They toss the fibers back into the carder and re-spin the results into a traditional "New Englandy" two-ply heavy worsted-weight yarn. The crimping wool fibers help keep the yarn lofty and not overwhelmingly dense, meaning that your front cable panels won't swing to and fro like giant cowbells around your neck. The colors are, naturally, quite one-of-a-kind. The spinnery calls it "ideal for sweaters and outerwear," which is absolutely spot-on.

The first thing I wanted to see was how the cable motif would work in a single-ply yarn. Yarn Over's two-ply composition gives it strength and structure with some shadows and texture from the plies. Two-ply yarns tend to give you more shadows on the fabric surface where that invisible third ply wishes it could nest. When you switch to a single-ply yarn for cables, you get a much smoother, more rounded surface rather like if you were knitting with licorice or strands of bread dough. (Both highly recommended ideas, by the way.)

Because Yarn Over has a mix of wool and mohair, I thought it fitting to start with a single-ply yarn using the same fibers. I chose Rowan Cocoon, a very loosely spun blend of 80% Merino wool and 20% kid mohair. The difference here is that the fibers are of a much finer grade than those used in Yarn Over.

Rowan Cocoon

unblocked



blocked



Whichever yarn you choose, you'll want it to have a good amount of elasticity—the reason why wool is such a solid choice. You're moving five stitches at a time on your cable needle, which is quite a stretch.

And yet Cocoon didn't actually have a ton of bounce to it, but I still managed to work the cables without too much trouble. The bigger challenge was in managing all those superfine fibers. The yarn is so loosely twisted that it often came unspun as I was knitting (I hold the yarn in my left hand) and my needle would snag only part of the strand, leaving stray wisps of long mohair fibers behind. My swatch relaxed in the wash and the cables blocked into a fluid though relatively low-relief fabric with a gentle halo of mohair fuzz. If you want less texture and more flow to your Linden, a yarn like Cocoon may be appropriate.

But what if you want a little more texture? The cables may give you knitting entertainment along the two front sides, but the rest of the sweater leads you deep into the land of stockinette. Nothing breaks up stockinette like a slightly textured yarn, and in the world of single-ply, semi-textured wool yarns, Manos del Uruguay reigns supreme.

Manos del Uruguay Wool Classica
unblocked blocked



This single-ply wool yarn blends soft Merino and more durable Corriedale fibers in a twist that varies ever so slightly in thickness as you go along. Adding to the faintly textured look is the fact that Manos yarns are hand-dyed in large kettles to produce a slightly semisolid color effect. From far away, your Linden will look fairly consistent, but the closer you get, the more visible the texture and color variations will be.

Knitting with Manos is always fun: no splitting or twisting, just steady progress. The cables were a bit tight, but after blocking it was clear that the crimp fibers had absorbed some of the excess twist to produce a fairly fluid fabric. The cables were slightly higher-relief than with Cocoon, but still quite smooth and discreet. This yarn would give your Linden a more crunchy, earthy look.

While Cocoon and Manos are both nicely rounded singles, as you start adding more plies to your yarn you get more strength and body. I wanted to get closer to the fullness Véronik achieved with Yarn Over, but I also wanted to see how a smoother two-ply yarn would behave.

Cascade 109

unblocked



blocked



For this swatch I pushed the envelope by choosing the fairly bulky Cascade 109. Squeezed onto size 8 needles, it produced a full and plush fabric that's perfect for a cozy winter sweater. The cables were very, very tight—which you can see in the un-blocked swatch. But once I soaked my swatch in warm water and blocked it to shape, everything relaxed magnificently. The effect of the cables on that plush fabric is like soft-serve ice cream pouring into a dish: the shadows from the two plies were toned down by the yarn's fullness, especially after that warm water bath brought a lovely bloom to the surface.

Once I started swatching, I realized just how endless a game this could be. Still left on my needles is the plump, mulespun worsted-weight wool from Marr Haven Farm, and in the knitting basket, Lopi, Malabrigo, Cascade Eco Wool, and a few others. Choosing yarn for any project can be an adventure in itself. Which yarns are you going to swatch?