

Are You Curious About Knitting Machines?

By Diana Sullivan

At fiber festivals, I meet many people who are unfamiliar with machine knitting and do not understand my unabashed enthusiasm for this hobby. Most people have no idea what beautiful projects can be made on a knitting machine or what the process is like.

Here is some basic information about the craft, as well as some comparisons to hand knitting.



What's a knitting machine? A knitting machine is a device that makes knitted pieces of fabric by using tiny latch hooks (the needles). A carriage passes over the hooks, feeding yarn to each one to form the knit stitches. Most knitting machines have the needles arranged in a long, loom-like strip.

What can you make on a knitting machine? Any type of knit garment or home décor item you might want to make can be knitted on a knitting machine. Most commercially made knits are made on knitting machines, but they're not just for factories! As a matter of fact, many of the



hand knitted patterns you see and purchase in

knitting magazines are designed and executed, in full or in part, on a knitting machine.

Home knitting machines make pieces of knitting up to about 36" wide.

How fast can you knit on a knitting machine? A single row of knitting, up to 200 stitches wide, takes only a few seconds. If you make a rectangular shape without increases and decreases, you can literally watch the fabric grow from the machine. There are lots of small projects that can be done in a single session – a baby blanket, a scarf, a hat, or perhaps a pair of slippers. A sweater with set-in sleeves requires several sessions to shape the individual pieces and sew them together. Complicated designs with fancy stitches and color schemes and shapes take a lot more time than large rectangles.



Does a machine take the challenge and creativity out of knitting? Not at all! Is it uncreative to use a sewing machine to make garments? Certainly, if you're willing to drive a car to work, run a washing machine, or do research on a computer, you appreciate technology. Those of us who use knitting machines are constantly looking for ways to make the fiber arts we love more productive and fulfilling.

Learning machine knitting can make you a much better hand knitter, too, because as you knit more items, you'll get a lot more practice with designing, fitting, and finishing.

The creative part of the process does not deteriorate because you can knit more items, and knit them fast, using a knitting machine. As a matter of fact, the

creative process is greatly enhanced by having this wonderful tool.



For instance, consider the craft of quilting. If you use a sewing machine to piece quilts instead of hand-sewing the pieces, you get more quilts done. You still creatively plan the quilts and choose the colors and fabrics. As a matter of fact, because you sew more quilts, you learn more rapidly about the things that work and the things that do not work in your designs. Your ability to create exquisite quilts improves tremendously, because you gain so much practical quilting experience!

Suppose you had a strong desire, perhaps to fulfill a family tradition, to create a hand-pieced quilt. Wouldn't you benefit from making the hand-pieced item after doing machine pieced quilts, after sharpening your design skills to the point where your use of colors, shapes, patterns, and textures would warrant all that labor?

With machine knitting, you get all the pleasure of choosing projects, designs, yarns, colors, stitch patterns and textures, and then you get to execute the project more quickly. You learn design more rapidly and you open the door to such amazing options as making a sweater for every single grandchild's holiday gift instead of making promises to knit for them "someday." With a knitting machine, "someday" can become your "now!"



What kinds of yarn can you use on a knitting machine? You can use almost any fiber that hand

knitters use. Because knitting machines use latch hooks of a certain size, you would use a “bulky” machine for thicker yarn weights, a “mid-gauge” machine for medium-thickness yarns, and a “standard gauge” machine for thinner yarns. Many home knitters own several sizes of machines, and others simply acquire the size they like best.

Do knitting machines knit only plain stitch patterns? No, absolutely not! Different machines have different patterning capabilities. Knitting machines make ribbing, stockinette, fancy laces, fair isle, double jacquard (thicker fair isle with no floats), tucked stitches, brioche stitches, slip stitches, and woven stitches. Knitting machines with electronic patterning capabilities can keep track of pattern charts up to 200 stitches wide and many, many more rows long. Machines with punch card patterning typically track 24-stitch-wide patterns (or any factor, like 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 12 stitches) by as many rows long as you feel like punching a card.



Imagine having your machine help you make complicated patterns perfectly!

Where can you find machine knitting patterns? Many knitting machines have “tracing devices” as accessories. The Brother knitting machines I often geach on have an accessory called a Knit Leader. It has a large mylar sheet, on which you actually trace



a sewing pattern. Then you make a gauge sample, do some measuring and set the gadget for your stitch size. It will guide you

exactly through the pattern piece so that it matches the sewing pattern perfectly.

Wonderful computer software is also available to help with designing shapes and patterns. Some of the software can download your original stitch patterns into an electronic machine’s memory, can calculate yarn requirements, and can instantly recompute different gauges or sizes for a garment shape.



Of course, you can also use commercial patterns written for machine knitters, and many hand knitting patterns can be adapted for machine knitting.

How expensive is this hobby? Like hand knitting, you don’t need a huge budget to enjoy machine knitting. Many knitters have “earned” their machines by making things to sell! Also like hand knitting, you can spend a small fortune on beautiful fibers, fancy equipment, and lovely magazines and books.

A great many machines are available used, and in the last few years, have dropped in price. For a few hundred dollars, you can pick up an excellent used machine. State-of-the-art new machines are available, too, as is software to permit custom programming for your machine.

Could you learn to machine knit? Of course you can! You’ll need to learn how to thread the machine, how to start (cast on) and how to end (bind off). You’ll need to learn how to increase, decrease and shape your fabric. You’ll also want to learn how to measure knit gauge and make things fit. Later on, you’ll enjoy learning decorative techniques, like making cables and lace.

My beginner course, free on my blog, is 35 lessons, each a simple, straightforward video of less than ten

minutes. I have taught many, many people to machine knit, and many of them are surprised at how quickly they learned! If you watch and then practice one video a day, in a little more than a month, you’ll be quite a skilled machine knitter. (Yes, I also sell high-definition DVDs, but you don’t have to pay to learn if you’re willing to watch YouTube.)

Where can you learn more? Because there aren’t a lot of machine knitting teachers around now, I’ve been producing video lessons for several years. You can learn all about machine knitting at my blog, for free, here:

<http://diananatters.blogspot.com>

In addition to those beginner lessons, I have many other video lessons that teach unusual, useful and beautiful techniques. I also provide lots of free videos and written patterns online.



A primary emphasis on my blog is **great finishing for both machine and hand knitters**. At my blog, you can learn “blue ribbon” finishing techniques – beautiful seams and grafts so that everything you make has an excellent, professional finish.

Diana Sullivan has a passion for teaching hand and machine knitting. Diana is a CPA who works for a nonprofit organization. She and her husband John live in Austin and have two adult sons. Blog: diananatters.blogspot.com YouTube channel: [Diana Sullivan](#)

