Caring For Your Quilts

Is the quilt washable? Though today’s quilt fabrics resist bleeding and shrinking, when a quilt that contains unknown fabrics is washed, there’s a risk that dye from one fabric may run onto the other fabrics. Test for colorfastness by rubbing the fabrics with a white cloth. If the test cloth remains white, test again by rubbing with a white cloth dampened with a diluted washing agent. If the cloth remains white, proceed with washing. If the test cloth shows color, you can be sure that the colors in the fabrics will run. Most color bleeding is permanent. You can relegate the quilt to the show category and treat it like an heirloom quilt or wash it anyway. If you choose to wash a quilt with nonpermanent dyes, the look of the quilt will change, perhaps with each washing. Washing with dye-catching cloths is also an option.

Laundry detergents are harsh on cotton quilts; they accelerate wear and fading of fabrics. Use them only to wash everyday quilts such as a child’s "blankie" that’s dragged on the floor or a grass-stained picnic quilt. Washing agents like Orvus Paste (also known as Orvus Quilt Soap) or Mountain Mist Ensure, available in quilt and sewing stores, are gentler on fibers and can be used when washing by hand or by machine.

Using Your Washing Machine

Washers without agitators are the best machines for washing quilts, but if the washing machine is large enough for your everyday quilt to freely circulate in water, use it. Here’s how: Fill the washer with lukewarm water. Add the chosen washing agent and agitate until it’s dissolved. Add the quilt and agitate on gentle cycle until the quilt is completely saturated. Let stand for about 10 minutes. Again agitate gently for a few minutes. (If water is very dirty, drain washer tub, refill, add cleaning agent, and repeat agitation until quilt looks clean.) Complete the gentle-wash cycle. Repeat rinse and spin cycles until there’s no evidence of soap residue.

Washing Quilts by Hand

To hand-wash quilts, follow the basic steps above, pressing the quilt up and down in the water to agitate it. If the quilt is large, use the bathtub for soaking BUT be sure to put the quilt onto a sheet that is larger than the quilt before lowering it into the bathtub. Without the sheet, the weight of the water-logged quilt will cause stitches to pop, seams to split, fabric to tear at the seams, dimensional distortion and other damage. Lift the water-logged quilt out of the tub by the corners and sides of the sheet and gently twist the top and bottom edges of the sheet as you would a candy wrapper to release a good amount of the water. Use the sheet to carry the quilt to the area in which you will be drying it.

Drying a Wet Quilt

Machine-drying is hard on quilts, but sometimes it’s the only efficient way to quickly get a quilt back in use. Be advised that putting a wet quilt in a dryer puts a strain on the quilting stitches (especially hand quilting), and may result in popped threads. It’s better to air-dry the quilt for a while to remove most of the moisture, then fluff in the dryer on "air" setting with no heat.
The best way to dry a quilt is to lay it flat between two sheets outdoors on a dry, breezy day. If indoor drying is the only option, lay down a plastic drop cloth to protect the floor, then spread out the quilt on top. Use fans to speed the drying time. Fluff in the dryer. Don’t hang a wet quilt. The weight will weaken the fabrics and tear the stitches.

**Heirloom Care**

Give your heirloom quilts a good airing once a year. Shake and air them on an overcast, dry, and breezy day. Don’t hang quilts over a wire or clothesline but, rather, spread them out on the grass over towels or a mattress pad. Refresh cotton quilts with a spin in the clothes dryer. Use a gentle cycle with no heat.

If a quilt is dusty, vacuum it gently. Secure a piece of nylon net over the head of a hand vacuum or hose attachment tool and let the suction do the work. Avoid any surface abrasion of the quilt.

Dry cleaning is generally not recommended, but may be the only appropriate method for wool or silk quilts if the soil cannot be vacuumed or gently brushed away. Quilt curators and appraisers advise against dry cleaning old quilts, saying the chemicals and agitation are harmful to the old textiles.

**Storage Solutions**

Find a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight and fluorescent lighting for storing your quilts. The ultraviolet radiation in both daylight and fluorescent lights causes dyes to fade and fibers to become brittle. Refolding and rotating your quilts seasonally helps protect them from light damage.

Avoid attics, garages, damp basements, and other locations where quilts are exposed to high temperatures, high humidity, and stagnant air. Heat and/or humidity, and lack of ventilation set up the right environment for mold and mildew.

If you put your quilts away, avoid storing quilts directly on wooden shelves or in cardboard containers with gift-wrap-type tissue paper. Untreated wood and paper cause the yellow and brown spots seen on many old quilts. Instead, roll cotton quilts (rather than folding) with acid-free tissue paper between the layers. Or, use polyester batting to cushion folds. To prevent permanent creases, regularly refold the quilts in a different way, then reroll them. Place rolled quilts inside cotton pillowcases or sheets to protect against light, dust, and contact with acidic materials. Do not use plastic bags as these tend to retain moisture and encourage mildew growth. If you need to store quilts on wooden shelves, place them in cotton pillowcases first. Then, use a layer of muslin or even aluminum foil to create a barrier between the wood and the pillowcase. Evaluate antique quilts individually before attempting to clean them. Improper cleaning can damage a quilt. If a quilt has sentimental or monetary value, consult an expert before attempting to clean it. Contact a quilt museum, university textile department, or antique expert for references.

**Extra Storage**

An unused bed makes an ideal storage spot for quilts. Spread your quilts on the bed, separating them with layers of cotton fabric, cotton sheets, or batting to prevent any dye transfer.