

## Domestic or Longarm?...that is the question!

Whether you quilt on a small domestic sewing machine, or have one of the largest longarm machines on the market, you can achieve the same results. Think

about it; what is machine quilting? Well, it's using a sewing machine to draw with thread and stitch patterns into your 3 layers of quilt. How you achieve this is dependent on the kind

of machine you choose.

Sit Down Machines involve moving the fabric under the machine needle, whilst Frame Mounted Machines involve moving the machine over the fabric. The technique is different but you are still drawing with needle and thread.

The distinction between the types of quilting machines becomes a little more complicated when you start referring to domestic machines, mid arm machines and longarm machines. Each category has models available for sit down quilting and frame mounted quilting and the distinction lies in the length of the arm and whether the machine can be used for multiple purposes.

Domestic quilting machines are made by the majority of the big sewing machine brands and can generally also do embroidery stitches and have feed dogs. They can be used as sit down machines or frame mounted machines and would have an arm length, or throat space, of between 6 and 12 inches.

Midarm and Longarm machines are specialist quilting machines that do not have feed dogs or a variety of stitches. They can only do "straight" stitching but are specially designed to withstand the rigours of sewing multiples layers in multiple directions. Midarm machines are relatively uncommon but would have an arm length of up to 17 inches. Longarm machines would stretch from 18 inches to 30 inches, with the most common being between 18 and 26 inches.

So if you are serious about your machine quilting and want to know the ins and outs of the different systems



here's what you need to be aware of. As with anything, each system has its pros and cons and it's important to understand your own quilting needs, expectations and budget!

Let's start with Sit Down machines. You could just start to quilt with your current domestic machine as long as you have a walking foot, darning or free motion quilting foot and feed dogs that can be lowered or covered. This is by far your cheapest option, but most domestic machines have a small arm length which makes manoeuvring a large quilt cumbersome and tiring. It is by no means impossible, and there are some amazing domestic machine quilters out there...just take a look at some of Diane Gaudynski or Leah Day's work! A longarm machine on a table gives



you added space to work which will automatically allow you to relax and achieve more flowing designs. These machines are particularly popular with art quilters and some of my favourites

are Helen Godden and Hollis Chatelain. You can also save space with Sit Down machines and pack them away if you need to. The main down side to a Sit Down machine for

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me is that you still need to baste your quilt sandwich...a task that I absolutely hate!

Frame based machines come in a whole spectrum of models from smaller machines to the real giants! The machine sits on a carriage which rolls up and down and side to side on tracks. You move the machine over the fabric and the quality of the frame and tracks determines how easy this is. I have a 26 inch machine weighing 19.5 kg and can move it easily with one hand.

The biggest disadvantage to Frame Mounted Machines is that they take up a lot more space and are

generally more costly. However, I feel the advantages significantly outweigh this. For instance you don't have to baste your quilts; you just load them onto the frame using one of a variety of methods. They have potentially much more quilting space although you do need to look carefully at the setup of the machine and frame and understand exactly how much space you will have to quilt with.

I love the fact that the bigger machines come with the most amazing stitch regulators. While this tool can be seen as "training wheels" whilst you are learning your

techniques, it is fabulous to have and after 5 years of constant quilting, I still engage the stitch regulator about 80% of the time. The majority of longarm machines also come with a ruler foot which allows you to use ¼ inch thick templates to get great shapes; straight lines, waves, curves, circles etc. Some machines also have couching feet which are awesome, so be sure to check exactly which feet come standard with your machine. To me a machine with between 18 and 26 inches of arm length is ideal...not too small to limit you in terms of the designs you can achieve easily and not too large that this is heavy, tiring and difficult to control.

Frame based machines can also be computerised. Motors attached to the carriage wheels move precisely to stitch out digitised patterns. You can use a computer system to complete all-over patterns, custom quilting or a combination of both. It gives you precision but does take a considerable amount of time to set up accurately. If you are a machine embroidery fundi then you can think of it as a huge embroidery machine executing designs on a much bigger hoop. Computers are being used more and more in the machine quilting world, but they are by no means essential.

#### **Tips for choosing batting**

Batting is the middle layer of a quilt and determines how warm and lofty a quilt will be. It comes in various thicknesses and can be made of polyester, cotton, polyester/cotton blends, wool, silk or bamboo.

Polyester batting is made of spun plastic fibres. It is washable, quite durable and does not shrink or bunch up in the quilt during washing. It holds warmth effectively because the

polyester fibres trap warm air but it does not breathe in the same way as natural fibres. Of the different commercial battings available, polyester is the cheapest.

100% cotton batting is the product of choice for quilters who prefer a traditional look. It is thinner than polyester (has a lower loft) and breathes. It will shrink when washed, causing the outer layers of the quilt to pucker slightly lending it an antique look. Today's cotton battings are designed to stay flat without bearding but are more expensive than polyester.

Blended battings are designed to combine the good characteristics of both cotton and polyester into a single batting. They are lighter and loftier but also provide the benefits of natural cotton fibres and are breathable. The most common blend is an 80/20 (80% cotton and 20% polyester). They are typically less expensive than pure cotton but more expensive than polyester.

Wool batting has warm and breathable fibres. They are light weight and have a higher loft than cotton and cotton blend battings. They are often layered on top of a cotton blend batting by quilters trying to achieve a faux trapunto effect, or where the quilting is wanted to stand out more.

Bamboo batting is a relative newcomer to quilt battings and favoured by environmentally conscious quilters. Bamboo is a fast growing, sustainable fibre that is relatively eco-friendly, although to make bamboo fibres soft enough for batting, chemical processing is necessary. Bamboo is naturally antibacterial, lighter than cotton, breathable and machine washable, however, price wise it falls into the

Quick summary of Sit down and Frame Mounted, Domestic and Longarm machines			
Sit down machine		Frame Mounted machine	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
More compact	Still have to baste quilts	Don't have to baste quilts	Space required
Generally cheaper	Stitch Regulators can be jerky	More sophisticated models have brilliant stitch regulators	Generally more costly
	Have to manoeuvre quilt	Manoeuvre machine rather than quilt	
	Cannot be computerised other than quilting within an embroidery hoop if it has this capability	Can be upgraded to be fully computer guided	

  

Domestic Machines		Longarm Machines	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Smaller and more compact	Smaller arm length may become a limiting factor if you want to do larger and more complicated designs	Longer arm length gives greater versatility in terms of designs that can be executed	Larger and heavier
Variety of stitches and uses (not just a quilting machine)	Multipurpose machine might need to be moved from table to frame and result is possible damage	Engineered to only quilt therefore are more able to deal with tension issues	Possibly more expensive
Possibly cheaper	Normally not adapted for use with longarm templates and rulers	¼ inch foot means templates and rulers can be used to get lovely shapes and lines	Machines can only quilt
	Smaller machine gives you less visibility around the area you are working	Greater visibility	

upper price range. A word of advice...if you buy what I call 'bales' of batting, i.e. the pre-packaged battings for different bed sizes, take them out of the packaging as soon as possible and drape them over a spare bed for a few days to allow the creases to relax. Or if you have a tumble drier, put the batting in with a damp towel and dry it at normal air temperature for about 20 minutes to get the creases out.

A final word, always buy at least 4-5 inches more batting on each

side of your quilt top to make the quilting process much easier!

*Till next time, Happy Quilting!*

*Claire*

For more information, to attend a class or to have a quilt quilted please contact Claire at [www.quiltastix.co.za](http://www.quiltastix.co.za) or 082 562 5983