

# Family Heirlooms

## Caring for Quilts

Quilts are a unique treasury of our history and need precious care to be preserved. Remember part of the beauty is age and the history of the quilt.

In caring for quilts, consider its age, then decide if you want to preserve it for the future or use it now. If you feel the quilt is a genuine “museum quality” antique and you wish it to become a heritage item, you may decide to not clean, or to just air it out.

If the quilt is a contemporary one that you want to enjoy without concern for its long-term future, it can be cleaned. This flyer will give some tips for either choice.

### Airing

A good airing out may be all that is needed to restore a fresh smell to a quilt, while preserving its workmanship, whether antique or contemporary.

Follow these tips:

- Remove quilts from permanent storage and expose them to air periodically.
- Air quilts indoors. Insects and sunlight can damage quilts. Prolonged, direct or indirect sun exposure will cause fading and may permanently weaken its fabrics.
- Support the quilt by draping it over furniture, such as a bed.
- During the airing period, gentle hand vacuuming may help remove musty soil and dust; use a fiberglass or nylon screen (available at hardware or building supply stores) between the quilt and the vacuum to prevent sucking the quilt into it. To prepare the screen, soak in a water/detergent solution and rinse well, then dry. Cover raw edges of the screen with twill tape to protect the quilt from abrasion and snagging.
- Treat persistent odors by using cedar shavings or activated charcoal in the storage area with the quilt. Wrap either of these materials in muslin and place in a muslin bag. Avoid contacting the quilt directly with these materials.

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### Deciding about Cleaning

#### Genuine Antiques

For quilts over 50 years old, home cleaning is usually not recommended. Quilts are complex fabrics: two layers of fabric, fiberfill, and quilting thread. Each layer has its own characteristics which may have potential problems and precautions that should be considered. These cannot be addressed in a flyer of this length. Even professional conservators are hesitant about cleaning historic quilts.

**Professional Drycleaning.** If you feel that your quilt needs more than a good airing, find an experienced and reputable drycleaner who will give it special handling. Drycleaning is recommended for items that are in sturdy condition and with dyes colorfast to drycleaning. Explain the age of the quilt and ask the drycleaner to use a short cleaning cycle.

Drycleaning is not safe for cleaning some quilts. Old silk brocades, velvets, and satins can disintegrate from the abrasion associated with conventional drycleaning procedures. For fabrics that cannot be cleaned safely, airing is the best care method.

Some cleaners may ask you to sign a statement not holding them responsible for the value of your quilt. Damage may show after drycleaning, because fiber degradation that already had occurred before cleaning, coupled with the abrasion of the normal cleaning process, can break brittle or weak fibers causing holes. The drycleaner has not caused the problem and cannot be held responsible.

#### Contemporary Quilts

If current use and sanitation are important to you, then decide whether to use home cleaning methods or a professional drycleaner.

**Home Laundering.** Home cleaning should be attempted only with contemporary quilts (those less than 50 years old) where the age, care instructions, and fiber content of the face fabric, fiberfill or batting, and backing fabrics are known. When instructions differ for the various components, follow the mildest care instructions.

If these quilts are made with cotton fabrics, cotton or polyester batting, and strong cotton quilting thread, you may be able to launder them successfully. Wool quilts or those with wool batting usually require drycleaning to prevent shrinkage. Wool is very heavy when wet and slow to dry, so laundering quilts that contain wool at home is difficult.

### **To launder quilts follow these steps:**

- Quilts that have never been washed should be tested for colorfastness. Use a detergent solution and a medicine dropper. Wet the colored areas of the quilt with a drop of the solution and blot with a white cloth (such as a clean linen or cotton dish towel). Do this test in areas least likely to show. If the dye bleeds, color will show on the white cloth and a ring may form around the wet spot. If bleeding occurs, do not wash the quilt.
- A regular laundry detergent will be most effective in soil removal, but special or "mild" detergents are often recommended. Avoid detergents containing bleach or enzymes.
- Use the gentle/soak cycle of your washer or soak in your bathtub and wash by hand.
- Use warm or lukewarm water; allow the quilt to soak for 3 to 5 minutes in a detergent solution, then rinse fully. If doing the process by hand, squeeze as much moisture out of the quilt as possible without wringing or twisting.
- Pad moisture out; use clean colorfast terrycloth towels.
- Support the quilt while drying. If you have a space in your house that is big enough, spread out plastic film (drycleaner or trash bags cut open) on the floor and lay the quilt on top.
- Avoid putting the quilt in the sun to prevent color fading and/or yellowing of whites.
- White quilts can be brightened using a water softener or an all-fabric bleach with the detergent wash. Avoid liquid chlorine bleaches completely, as these will degrade and weaken fabrics in the long run.

**Brown, Yellow, and Rust Spots.** Many people complain about brown spots on old quilts. Usually these are aged stains that are impossible to remove. Many "old home remedies" are suggested. Usually they have no real benefit in removing stains and often they further weaken the fabric. Accept stains and treasure them as evidence of previous family use.

**Quilts from the 1960s.** If you know the quilt was made during the early 1960s, it may include some permanent press fabrics that will "tender," split, and fall apart easily from abrasion or care procedures of any kind. The early permanent press finishes reduced the strength of the fibers, making them more brittle and more easily broken.

### **Storage**

Be as careful about storage as cleaning. Improper storage may result in irreparable damage to quilts. Hints for storage:

- Remember to date quilts, even those you are making now. Use thread or mark a piece of muslin with permanent ink and stitch it on the quilt. Do not write directly on the quilt.
- Protect quilts from direct contact with metal or wood (even cedar) by using storage covers. Clean and unbleached materials, such as old white towels, unbleached sheets, or pillow case covers, make good storage covers.
- Do not use plastic bags. They may cause fabric color changes, or insect and mildew problems.
- Fold quilts differently each time to avoid creases which cause fibers to break; fold inside out to avoid abrasion from pulling them in and out of storage.
- Do not roll quilts for storage because of the layers and the thickness.
- Place stored quilts in an area of relatively even humidity (50% relative humidity) and room temperature. Avoid attic or basement storage.
- Clean cedar chests are good storage places because they are air and insect tight. If the cedar is more than a few months old, its effectiveness as a moth repellent is limited.
- Avoid cardboard boxes which have a tendency to become damp in humid weather and are acidic.
- Avoid excessive use of moth balls or crystals as moth repellents. Place the repellent in a muslin bag above the quilt because the fumes are heavier than air.

For more information on protection against insects, mildew, and moths ask for Extension publications: [Preventing Mildew in Your Home](#), Recovery-4; [Carpet Beetles, Clothes Moths, and Their Control](#), IC 414. These publications can be obtained from Extension Distribution Center, 119 Printing and Publications Bldg., Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011.

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