

You've found a beautiful woven fabric for your dining room curtains, or you'd love to use a heavy canvass to create cushions for outdoor furniture. Don't be put off because you're afraid of sewing on heavy (or light) material. You can sew almost anything on a machine – the trick is selecting the right needle, thread, tension and stitch size.

Needles

Choosing the right needle can seem bewildering. If possible, ask for help. Knowledgeable staff in specialist shops are often delighted to be able help you. But the basic rules are simple – fine material: fine needle, thick material: thick (and strong) needle. This is obvious really. If you're sewing something much tougher, a thin needle will quickly break, but if you're sewing something really delicate, a fat needle will leave ugly holes that are bigger than you need.

Threads

The traditional way is to choose your thread to match your fabric; cotton for cotton, silk for silks and wool). Polyester works on well on most materials, especially synthetics, so if you're just buying to stock up your sewing box for occasional mending and hemming it's the best to go for. Polyester tends to be the strongest and doesn't rot, so use this for sewing leather and plastic.

Tension

The tension dial can seem like a bit of a mystery, but it needn't fill you with fear. Tension just means how easily the thread flows through the machine. Basically a higher number on the dial (turning clockwise) increases the tension and turning to a lower number (anti-clockwise) decreases tension. The best place to start is to do a test on the fabric. If it puckers or the thread snaps you're going to need to adjust the tension. If the thread is thicker than you usually use, try setting the dial slightly lighter. You might also need to adjust the tension on the bobbin – this varies from machine to machine, so check with your handbook for details. If you're using a very fine thread for a thin fabric you may need both the bobbin and tension dial slightly higher.

Stitch length

The numbers on the stitch length dial (or electronic indicator) show how many stitches will be made per inch. A shorter stitch can be neater, but it also produces a tighter seam. Longer stitches are necessary for very thick fabrics so that you don't end up with a perforation that will tear. Again, if possible, check your manual for a guide to fabrics and stitch lengths.



Cirencester
29 Castle Street
Cirencester GL7 1QD
Tel: 01285 643 111

Monmouth
120 Monnow Street
Monmouth NP25 3EQ
Tel: 01600 775531

Bath
London Road
Bath BA1 5DJ
Tel 01225 471167