

Sergers Add Professional Look To Homemade Garments

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COLUMBIA — Most home seamstresses agree that the garments they make are better sewn, more economical and better fitting than ready-made clothing. However, they frequently have that telltale "homemade look."

Now home sewers can get more professional results by using an overlock machine, or serger, which makes the seam, cuts off the excess fabric and overlocks in one operation. Not only does the machine produce professional looking seam finishes, it also cuts sewing time drastically.

Janet Herman, Columbia, who teaches a workshop on using the serger through the Penn State Cooperative Extension Service, says, "It has really revolutionized home sewing. There is a whole new interest in sewing, especially for people who have no time."

Herman, who also works at the Columbia Garment Co. Factory Outlet, adds, "The most frequent comment I hear is, 'I just love it. I don't know how I sewed without it.'"

John Binkley, who owns Binkley's Sewing Machine Shop of Elizabethtown, agrees that it is a boon to the home sewer. "It speeds up sewing tremendously." Binkley displays a dress which his wife sewed in 28 minutes, after it was cut and ready to go. He says, "The overlock machine does for the sewing room what the microwave does for the kitchen." Binkley sells several brands of overlock machines, and his store is the oldest Singer dealership in Pennsylvania.

Binkley believes the machine is useful not just to the home seamstress, but also to women who make crafts for sale.

The overlock machine first started to appear for home sewers about five years ago, though Herman says her research shows

that they have been available since the 1940's. The serger has been used in sewing factories since the early 1900's, but professional models are heavier and bigger.

What the serger cannot do is replace a conventional sewing machine. While some models do sew a single straight seam, they are not designed to do all the jobs a regular sewing machine can do.

What it does do is finish seams and edges in record time. Herman says, "It sews at twice the speed of the conventional machine."

Sergers can do the job on any kind of fabric, from heavy corduroy and denim, to lightweight lingerie fabric. Binkley points out that the only limitation on thickness of fabric is the space between the machine and the cutting edge.

Binkley says there are three kinds of overlock machines. One is a single needle, three thread machine; the second is twin needle, four thread machine which will make a straight chain stitch and overlock; and the third is a twin needle, four thread unit which will overlock and make a safety lock stitch which will not unravel.

Prices vary considerably among the many models available, and Binkley says the choice must come down to which features a home sewer wants. He said he has guidelines which suggest questions a potential buyer must ask herself, including, "Which suits me the best?"

He said the single needle will work with all types of fabric, makes a good overlock stitch and is probably the one to buy if price is the important factor.

The chain stitch model is useful for people who may have a cottage industry, or who are doing draperies or alterations. He noted that it is easier to make alterations look like the original garment.

The top-of-the-line model with the safety lock stitch offers the



Janet Herman works on a turtleneck sweater on her serger. She says the machine has revolutionized home sewing and allows seamstresses to complete garments much more quickly and professionally than with a conventional sewing machine.

versatility of purchasing extra attachments for doing the blind hem stitch, adding elastic to lingerie, and attaching lace. It also does rolled hems, though some single needle models can do rolled hems, useful for napkins, tablecloths and scarves.

Herman says that an increasing number of the sergers are being used to make curtains with ruffles, something that takes yards and yards of finished fabric. Perhaps the most popular use is for T-shirts, turtlenecks, jogging outfits and other garments made from knit fabrics. The finish is truly professional, with no raveling and no extra threads. The overlock finish also adds to durability of clothing.

Binkley says it has been his experience that interest in the overlock machine has peaked, primarily because of the cost. Most of the machines are manufactured in Japan, with at least one made in West Germany, and the price has been affected by the drop in the dollar in relation to the yen. He said the price has risen at least \$150 in the last year. Obviously, it is difficult for a seamstress to justify the expense if she is sewing to save money for her family.

Both Herman and Binkley agree that there is a market for used sergers, and Binkley says they can be traded in if someone wants to upgrade the machine they have.

Getting familiar with the serger is important for anyone who purchases one. Herman says, "They must read the book that comes with it and use it. They must learn by experience. The book that comes with the machine is the most important."

She urges, "Women should buy from a reputable dealer who will sit and go over it and where she can go back if she has a question. It should also be someone who does repairs right there."

Binkley says he always welcomes machine buyers back to his shop. He explained that someone may buy a machine, and not put a buttonhole in for the first six months, and then realize they don't know how to use it. He said they are always welcome to come back. He and his wife have attended schools on the serger to become familiar with all its operations.

The overlock machines have no bobbins; the threads go directly through tensions and thread guides to the needles. Binkley pointed out that there is now thread manufactured for overlock machines, but regular spools of thread can be used. Herman says it is important to use only good quality thread because of the speed, the tension and the amount of friction. Cheap threads will tear, leaving a frustrated sewer.

Binkley says it is possible to simply knot a thread when the color must be changed or when the spool is getting empty. The fine knot can go through all the holes to the needle, and at that point, it can be snipped and re-threaded.

The threading process looks difficult to a novice, but Binkley noted that usually there are different colors for each tension guide and different symbols to guide the placement of the thread. It is important to get the thread through all the spools correctly, because, as Binkley notes, "If you

miss a threading function you mess up the stitch quality. And you must be sure to tuck down the thread in the spools."

Another feature of the overlock machine is an extra long feed dog, to guide the material safely through the stitching. Herman notes that pins cannot be allowed to go through the machine as they will blunt the knives which do the trimming. Binkley cautioned that some models of the overlock machine have knife blades which are easily accessible and says, "You must be careful of your fingers."

Both stitch length and stitch width are adjustable on most models.

In her class, Herman recommends several books which can be helpful to the new overlock user. They are: "Sewing with Sergers, A Complete handbook for Overlock Sewing" by Gail Brown and Pati Palmer; "Overlock Sewing" by J. & P. Coats; and "The Successful Serging Handbook" by Leonora Johnson and Sharon Herschau.

Herman says she finds the classes she teaches helpful to her because, "I always learn something. It's a giving time." She admits that the teaching part is fun for her because, "I love people." A seamstress since she was five years old, Herman says she continues to "read everything I can" and learn new techniques.

About the overlock machine she concludes, "You can have a garment that looks nice, it's done fast and it doesn't look like it's thrown together." What more can anyone ask?



This is the serger, or overlock machine, which has been on the market for home sewers for about five years, but has been used in the garment industry for decades. This small but mighty machine cuts sewing time in half, but cannot completely replace the conventional sewing machine.

Homestead Notes