



Beginner's Guide to Beautiful Hand Embroidery

by Kristen Valencia

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Choosing Your Fabric

Floss often gets the spotlight in hand embroidery, but the fabric that floss is stitched on is just as critical to the finished look of your project. The right background fabric (or “ground”) will support and showcase your gorgeous stitching. But if you use the wrong kind, you can stretch, pucker and even distort your design, ruining all that hard work.

So if you’re not a fan of unpicking hundreds of stitches (and we’re guessing you’re not), here’s how to choose — and prep! — the best foundation for your floss every time.



6 Tips for Choosing Fabric

1. Pay Attention to Thread Count

Just as in bed linens, thread count (the number of threads in one square inch) matters in embroidery fabric. The difference is that we’re looking for a lower number so that the weave isn’t too tight. (If it is, it’ll be tough — possibly even painful — to do your stitching.) Generally, fabrics with thread counts under 150, such as muslin, cotton, Aida, linen, Flour Sack and Osnaburg, will allow you to pull a needle and thread through without any problem.

Some of our favorite embroidery fabrics are muslin and Osnaburg (both cottons): Osnaburg has a neutral color, which allows you to embellish it with all sorts of brightly-colored flosses, while muslin comes in natural unbleached or bleached white. Both have looser weaves (though muslin is a bit tighter), making them winners for hand embroidery.



2. Go Au Naturel

You can keep your clothes on, but look for fabric made from natural materials, like cotton, linen, silk, wool or a blend of these. Natural textiles tend to be soft, yet are sturdy enough to support decorative stitching. Plus, they have fibers that run both horizontally and vertically, which allows a needle to easily pass through. With synthetics, your needle may perforate threads, causing it to fray over time.

3. Consider Kona for Quilting

If you're hand embroidering a quilt, you can't go wrong with Kona (or "quilters") cotton. It's lightweight, will stay taught in a hoop, and has an embroidery-friendly 120 thread count. It's also less sheer than other types of cotton, which means your stitches won't show through.

4. Pre-Wash to Avoid Puckering

Always launder your fabric before you start stitching. This tightens up the weave, making sure it's consistent across the panel. It also pre-shrinks the fabric, which is key if you'll be incorporating your embroidery onto a shirt, quilt or other fabric project that may get washed.

5. Stabilize the Situation

If you're planning to make any heavy or layered designs — or you'll be embroidering with beads, buttons or other accents — consider adding a stabilizer or interfacing to the back of your ground fabric. This will make it strong enough to handle heavier stitching, but won't change the look of your project.

6. When In Doubt, Try It Out

Really, the best way to choose a fabric is to pick up a few samples, do some stitching, and see which one works and looks the best for your particular project. Every textile you try adds to your embroidery expertise, and pretty soon you'll intuitively know which fabric is the right choice.

Choosing Your Needles and Floss

Embroidery... it looks so cool, yet can seem so mystifying when it's time to gather your supplies. I, too, once stood at the fabric store wondering which needles and thread were appropriate for, um, everything. But don't fear! The basics you need are actually pretty straightforward.



Needles

Depending on the style of hand embroidery you're trying, and the fabric and floss you use, the right needle will (literally) make or break your design. It's important to pick the right needle style (more on that in a

moment) and to buy quality. Cheapie needles can bend or break, which is totally frustrating and can even damage your project. There are three types of needles you need to make friends with right away: embroidery (AKA crewel), chenille and tapestry. They're shown from left to right in the photo above.



Embroidery needles are the thinner of the three — they're usually long with a very sharp point designed to move easily through embroidery-appropriate fabric. Embroidery needles usually have a large eye that's easy to thread with your floss of choice. Chenille needles have sharp points too, but they also have a larger eye and thicker form than embroidery needles.

They work well on the same fabrics as embroidery needles. Tapestry needles have a large eye, but a blunt point that's great for canvas work or counted cross-stitch on aida fabric (a type of open-weave cotton).

All three needles come in a range of sizes where the higher the number, the thinner or smaller the needle. You'll vary your needle size depending on the size of your floss. The goal is to have a needle-thread combo that's easy to work with, but leaves the minimum possible hole in your fabric once you pull the needle through.

Floss

Embroidery floss is available in cotton, silk, satin or pearl (sometimes spelled perle) cotton.



The most common hand embroidery floss is 6-strand cotton. The strands can be divided according to how fine you want your finished embroidery piece to be. The fewer the strands, the more fine the finished design.

Pearl cotton, unlike 6-strand cotton floss, can't be divided. Like needles, pearl cotton comes in a range of sizes with the higher number indicating a thinner or finer size.



If the embroidery design you're creating calls for thin or fine floss, you'll want to use a thinner needle to make sure you don't end up with visible pokey holes in your fabric. For 6-strand or thicker ply floss, you'll need something larger to make sure the floss fits through the needle's eye.

Be savvy and test out needles and floss size before you actually begin an embroidery project. That way you get a feel for what works best.

Once you're ready to start for real, here's a pro tip: cut the floss the length of your forearm (from fingertips to elbow). This will make sure the pieces aren't long enough to twist or knot as you stitch. If the floss gets fluffy or dull-looking as you're working, that's your cue to switch to a fresh piece.

Choosing Your Hoop

Embroidery hoops can be the key to joyful stitching — or make you totally miserable. So it's definitely worth the time to choose the right hoop for your project. There's no real substitute for old-fashioned trial-and-error, but having a little info up front can help.



Hoop Sizes

Embroidery hoops come in two pieces: the outer edge (or framing piece) which has a spring or screw for tightening, and an inner piece that fits inside of it.

Round hoops, the most common shape hoop, range in size from 3"- 14" in diameter.

The right size hoop depends on the size of the project. The hoop should fit around your fabric with some overhang. You want the fabric to lay taut within the hoop, but not be so tight that it causes the fabric to pucker after you run the floss through.

Choose a hoop that fits comfortably in one hand, so you can stitch with the other. The hoop doesn't have to frame the entire embroidery pattern, it can be larger or smaller, but do remove the hoop from the project into between stitching sessions — you don't want the hoop to leave a permanent indentation on your fabric!

Material: Wooden vs. Plastic

Embroidery hoops made out of wood or bamboo have a smooth inner hoop. Sometimes that inner hoop needs a little extra padding, so wrap it with twill tape for a snugger fit.

Quality matters when it comes to wooden hoops — if you buy the cheapest one you can find, you run the risk of having to crack while you're stitching. No thank you.

Plastic embroidery hoops often have a groove or lip on the inside where the inner hoop locks into the outer hoop, in addition to having the screw hardware to tighten the hoops together. This makes for a snug fit and allows the fabric to be held taut for hand embroidery projects.

Metal embroidery hoops aren't common — I've really only seen vintage ones in the wild. If you like to feel connected with the hand embroiderers of days gone by, definitely give it a go.

Hoop Shapes

Round hoops are the most common shape — you'll find them readily at craft stores — but they're not your only option. If square or oval shaped make more sense for your project, then seek out one of these special frames.

Embroidery Hoops vs. Quilting Hoops

Hand quilters have their own special hoops, but that doesn't mean they're off limits. Quilting hoops are larger than embroidery hoops and can support thicker fabrics. A square hoop or Q-Snap frame, often used for hand quilting, is made out of PVC and has outer clips that fit snuggly around each of the four edges of the project, leaving the corners exposed. It works just as well for embroidery as it does for hand quilting.

Now you know your options. But ultimately, the right choice comes down to personal preference. Pick something that fits your project and is comfortable for you to hold. The best way to find your perfect hoop? Go Goldilocks and on them and try out a few.

Top 10 Must-Know Stitches

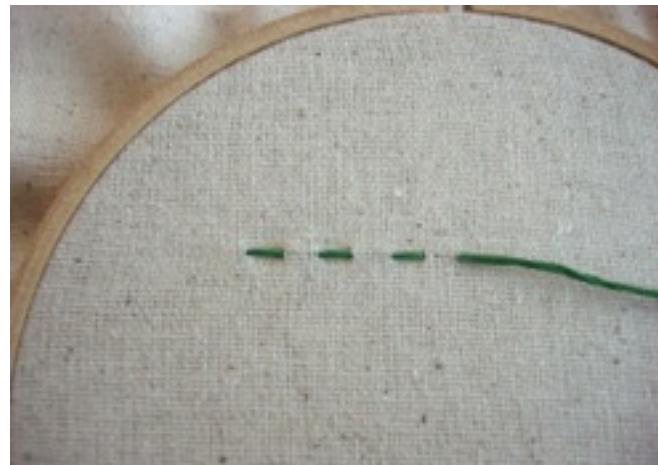
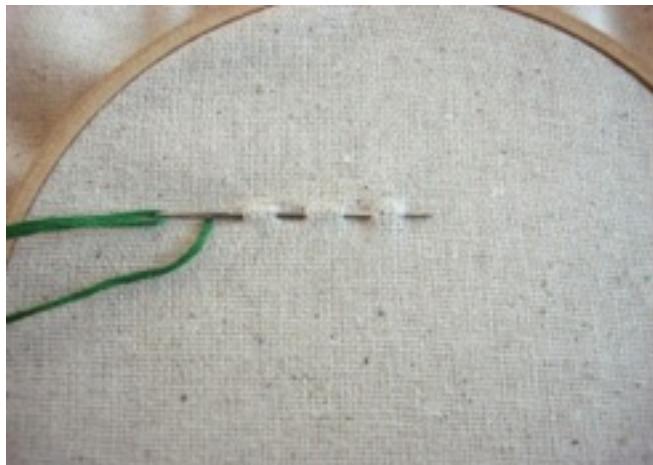
We're sending a big thank-you to embellished jeans and cheeky throw pillows for making embroidery the latest crafty comeback. (Seriously, just look at the magic that's happening over on Insta.) Want in? These 10 stitches will get you started, and are a great foundation for taking your hoop to the next level.



1. Running Stitch

Not to be confused with the running man, the running stitch offers a quick way to outline a design. There are two methods you can use.

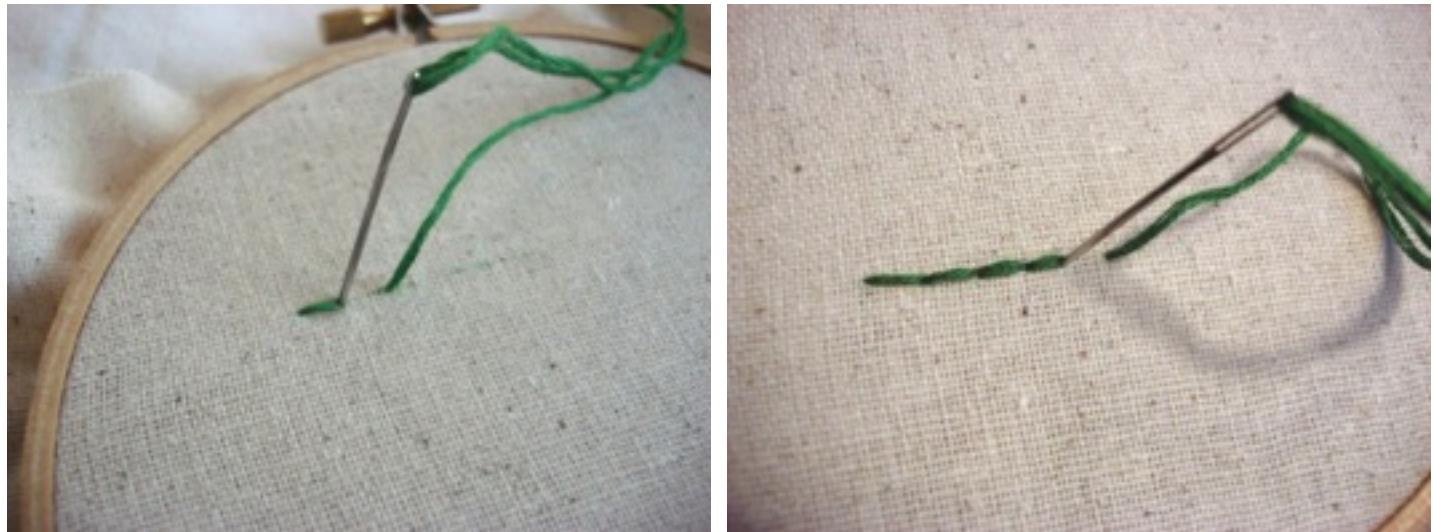
The first is the sewing method: simply weave the needle and floss through the fabric in one continuous motion to create several stitches at once, as if you were sewing a seam.



The second is the "punch and poke" or "stabbing" method: push the needle through the fabric to the back, then poke it through to the front a short distance away, creating one stitch at a time.

2. Backstitch

Unlike the running stitch, the backstitch creates a solid line and is good for hand embroidering text or outlining a design.



Begin by pulling the needle and floss up through the fabric and do one stitch forward. From underneath, space the needle out the length of your desired stitch, pull up through the fabric, and bring the needle and floss back down through the end of the previous stitch.

3. Split Stitch

Similar to the backstitch, the split stitch creates a solid line, but its braided texture is all its own. This stitch is another good option for text and outlines, but also works well for filling in designs.

To begin, pull your needle and floss up through the fabric and create one straight stitch.

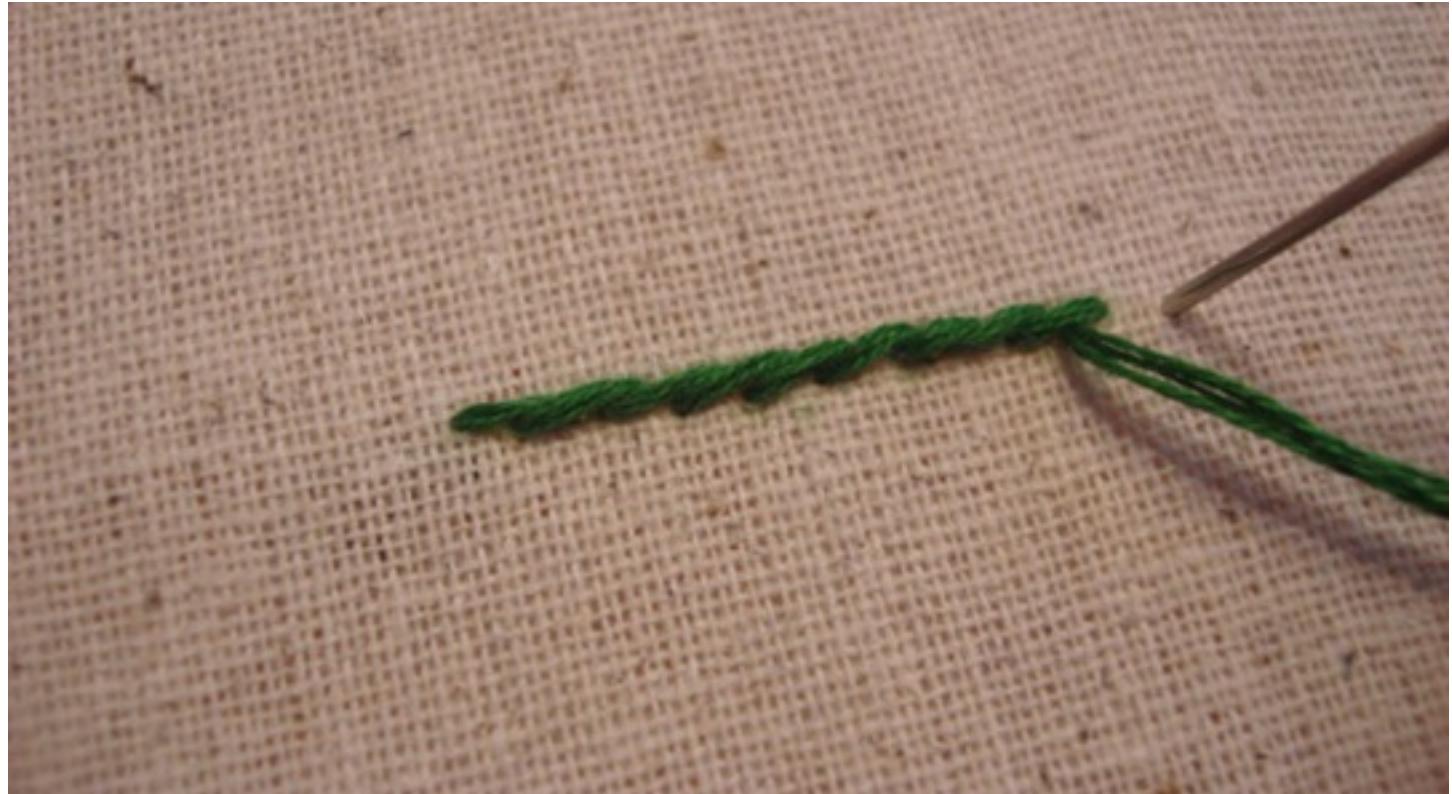


With your needle and floss on the underside of your hoop, bring the needle up through the center of the stitch you just created. Stitch forward the same length as your initial stitch. Repeat by bringing the needle up through the center of each stitch.

4. Stem Stitch

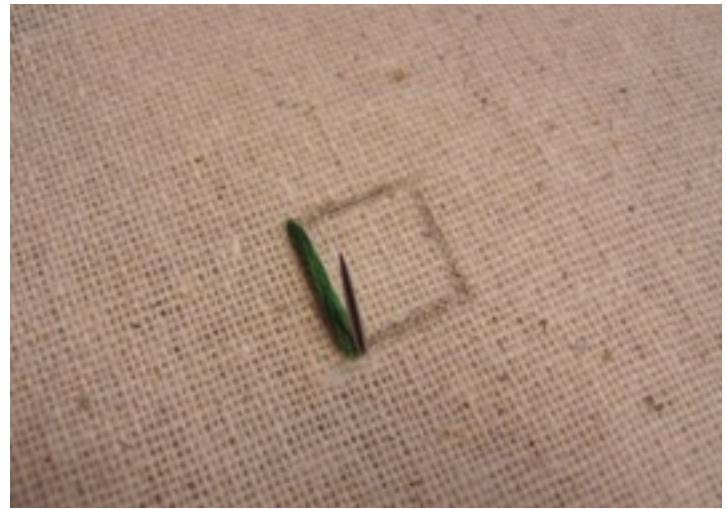
This stitch got its name — you guessed it — from being used to create flower stems and vines . But really, it's a nice option for anything that needs to curve.

Similar to the split stitch, start by creating one straight stitch forward. Then, bring the needle and floss up underneath the fabric, but instead of going through the center of your initial stitch, go just to the side of the stitch.



5. Satin Stitch

When you're creating hearts or filling in leaves, it's likely you want the design to have a smooth appearance. That's where this stitch comes in. It adds a nice raised texture, and gets the job done super fast.

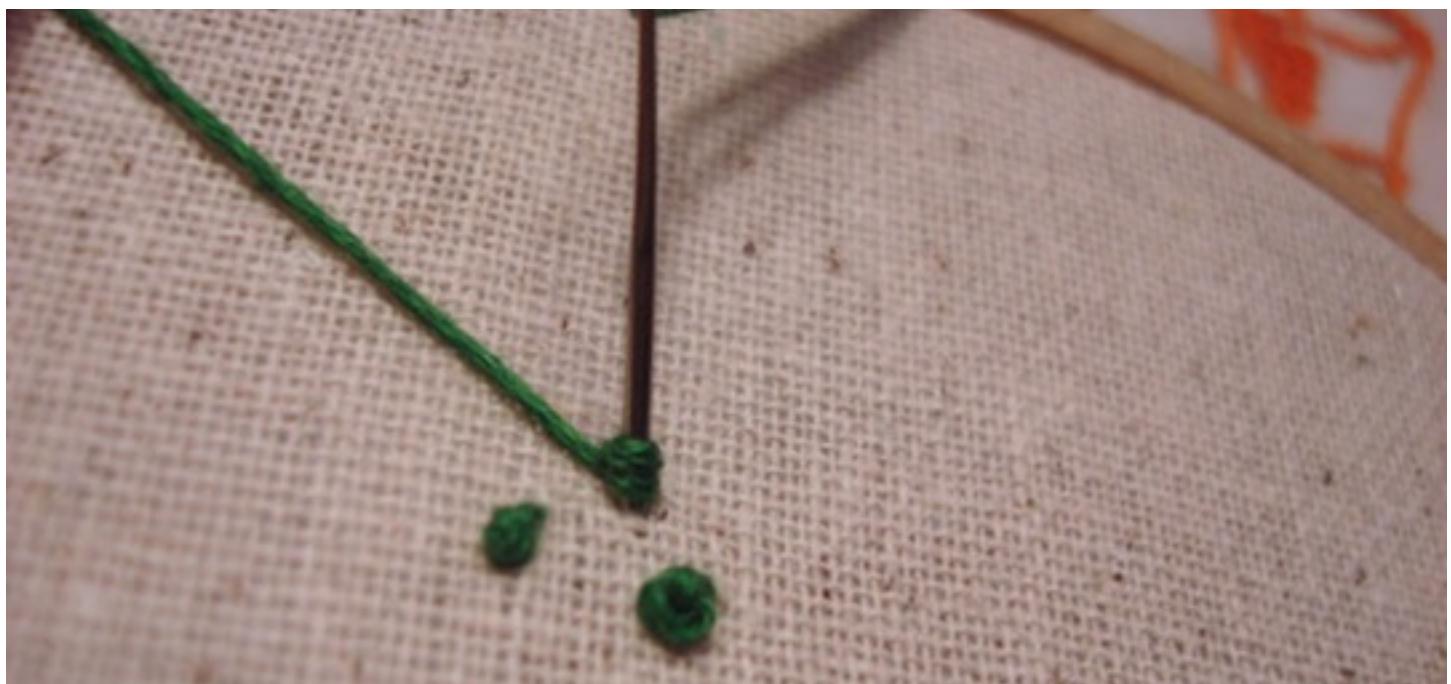
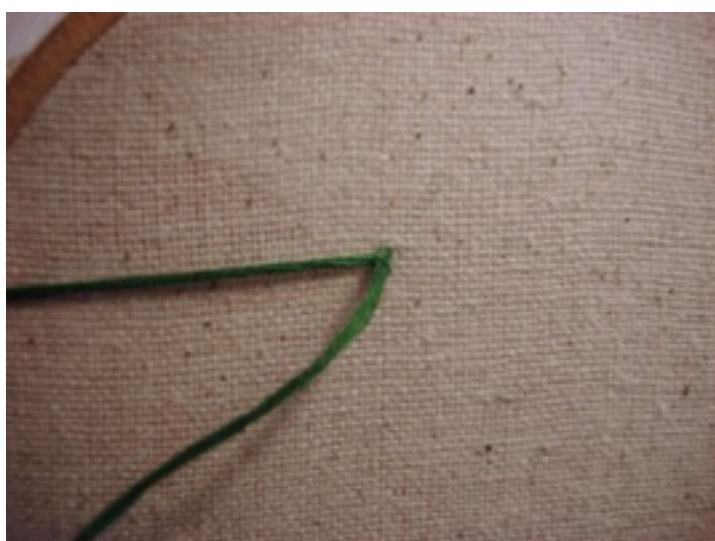
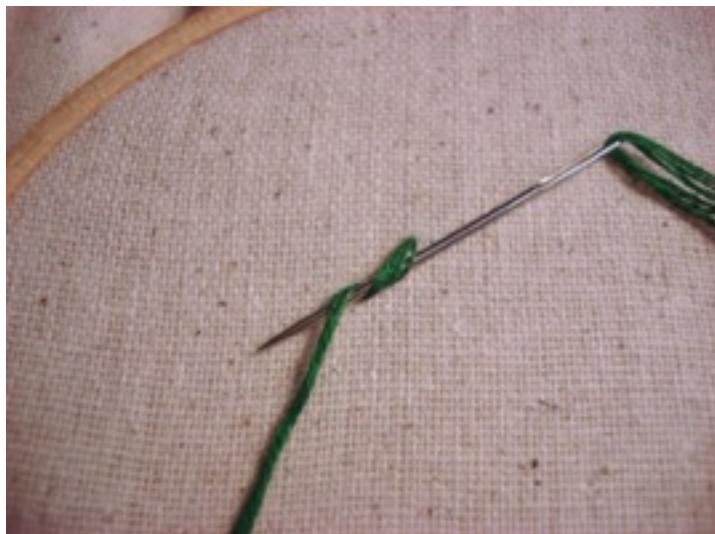


First, draw out the shape you want to fill to use as a guide. With your needle and floss, create one stitch that extends from one end of the shape to the other. Bring the needle up again just next to the opposite side of the initial stitch. Keep the stitches close to one another, as required to fill the pattern or design you are working with.

6. French Knots

This decorative stitch makes a pretty accent design throughout your project, and you'll even need two hands to pull it off. But don't worry, it's not tough! First, bring the needle and floss up through the fabric. Then wrap the floss around the needle twice. Hold the end of the floss taut and bring the needle down just next to the space where it came through the fabric.

Keep holding the floss taut as you pull the needle through. You can vary the size of your French knots by wrapping the floss around the needle anywhere between one and three times.





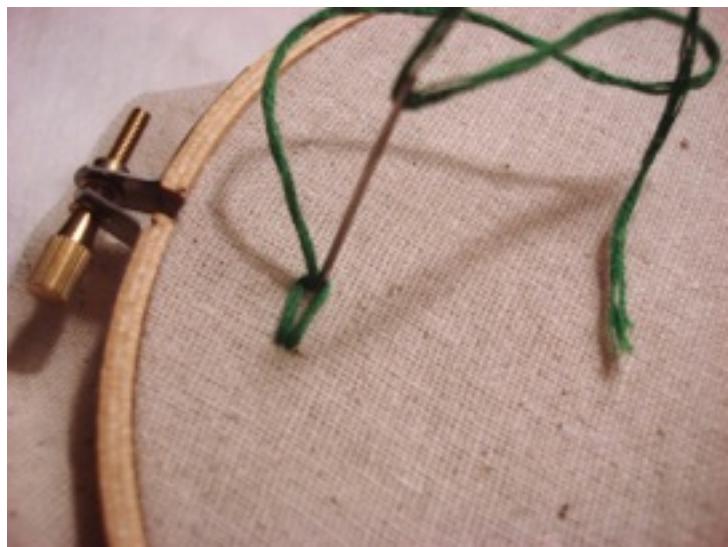
7. Chain Stitch

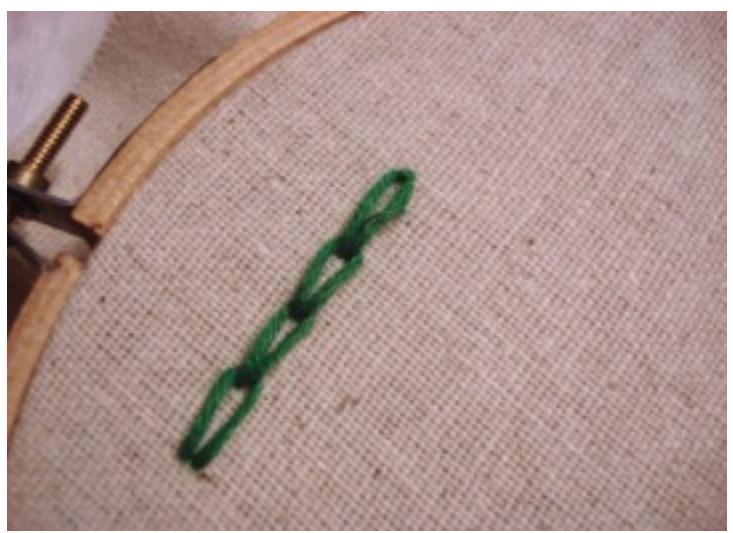
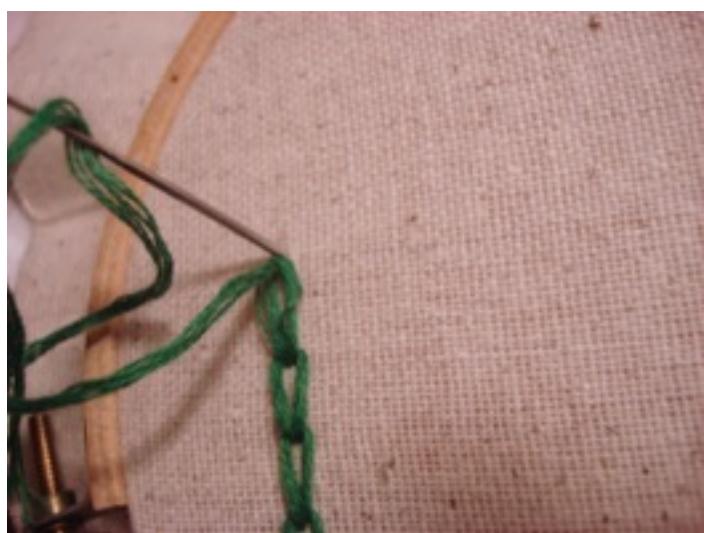
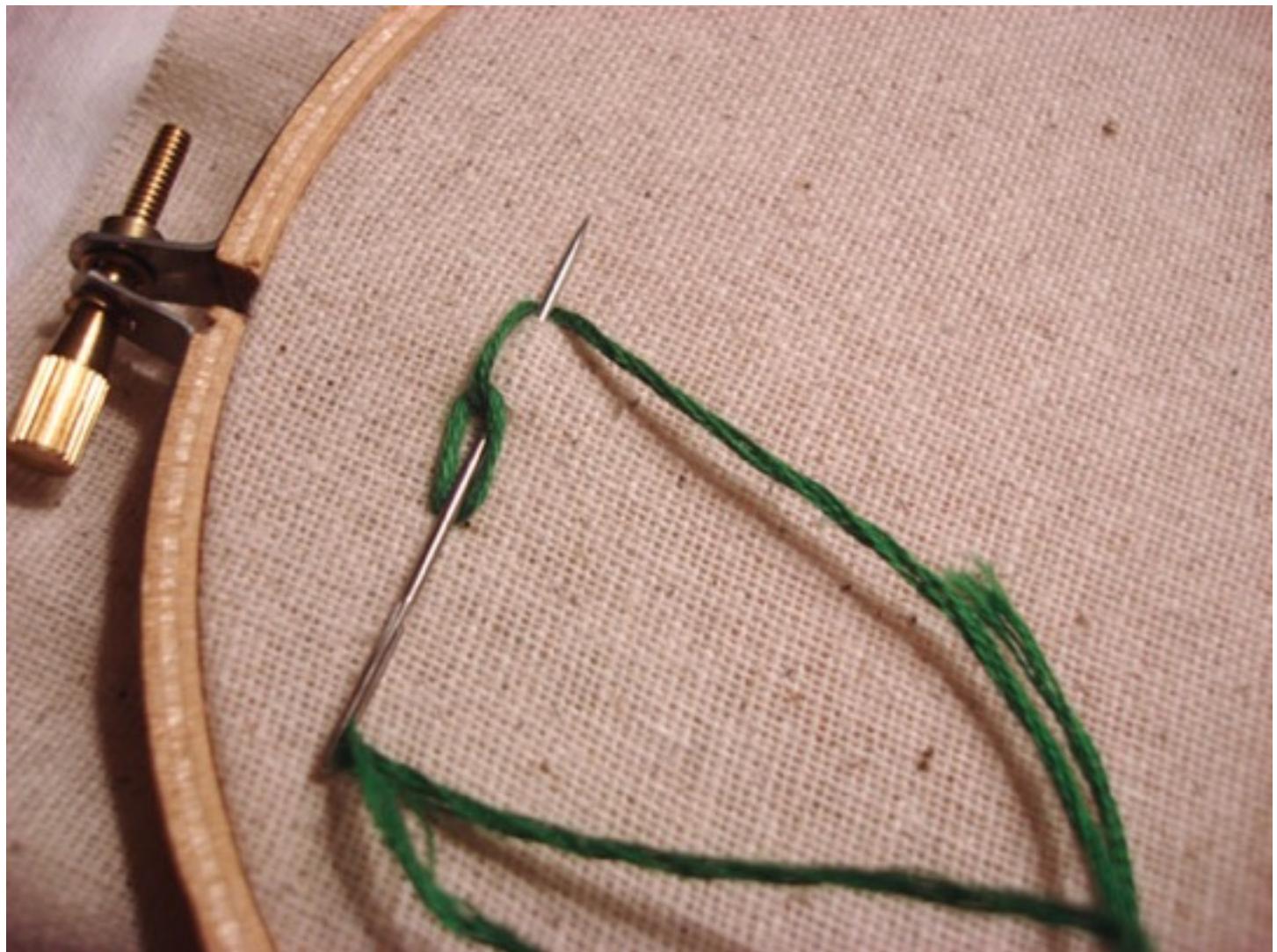
This stitch may look complicated, but with some practice we pinky promise you'll get it. It's another one that's great for an outline, or the frame around a patterned design.

First, pull your needle and floss up through the fabric, then insert it going down right beside where you first came up. Don't pull the floss all the way through the fabric; allow it to form a loop. Bring the needle up through that loop (this tethers it from being pulled all the way through the fabric) and pull.

To make the next chain stitch, place the needle either directly in the hole you just stitched, or close to it, and pull through to create another loop. Again, don't pull the floss completely through the fabric. Pull the needle up through the loop to tether it and pull.

Repeat the steps to continue the chain. When you reach the end, create a small stitch over the loop to secure it.





8. Lazy Daisy

This variation of the chain stitch is often referred to as the "detached chain stitch" or "lazy daisy." Why? Instead of continuing the chain, you make a small stitch just over the end of the loop to create what looks like a daisy petal.

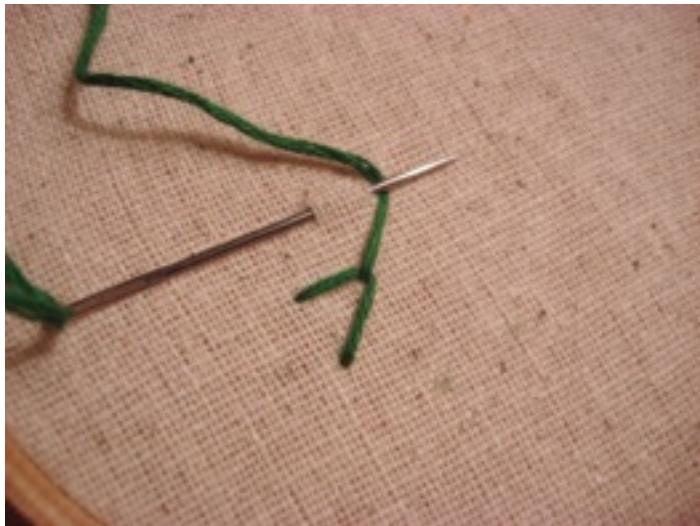


Just like the chain stitch, take your needle and floss and create a stitch, but before you pull the floss all the way through the fabric, allow it to form a loop. Bring the needle up through that loop in order to tether it from being pulled all the way through the fabric. Create a small stitch over the top of the loop. Space out the next loop or use the stitch to create a daisy. Continue as desired.



9. Feather Stitch

Another way to riff off the chain stitch is the feather stitch, which uses the second stitch to anchor the loop of the previous one. This particular chain variation works well when you want to cover more space.



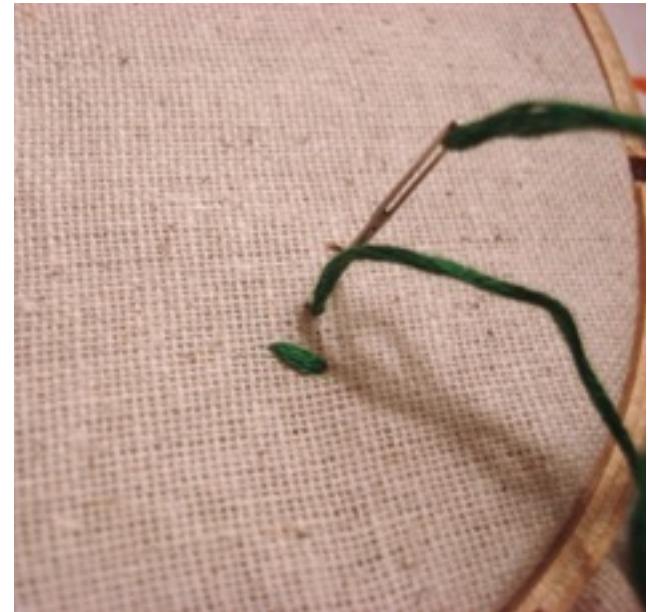
Start by bringing the needle and floss up through the fabric and creating a straight stitch. Don't pull the floss all the way through; allow a loop to form and bring the needle up through that loop.

Space the next stitch over in the opposite direction from the previous stitch. Create another loop by not allowing the floss to go completely through the fabric. Pull the needle up through the loop and repeat on the opposite side.



10. Seed Stitch

Imagine tossing the contents of a seed packet into the air and watching the seeds fall randomly on the ground. That's what the seed stitch looks like, and it's a great filler stitch.



To do it, bring the needle and floss up through the fabric and create a short, straight stitch. Bring the needle and floss up through the fabric again in a different angle. Continue until you have a filled area. Depending how close or far you space out your seed stitches, you can create a wide fill or layers of floss that appear to have dimension.



Meet the Author



KRISTEN VALENCIA

Kristen is a self-taught embroiderer with over 10 years of stitching experience. Her passion for bright and colorful stitches comes from the hand-embroidered Mexican blouses she encountered on a trip to Mexico City many years ago. She returned to her home in Southern Arizona and took up embroidery, learning stitching techniques from books found at flea markets and vintage stores. As a child, her grandmother taught her how to sew, and today, Kristen combines those sewing skills and stitching work, creating new and different places to infuse embroidery into every area of her world.

Classes for Beginners:

Startup Library: Hand Embroidery - Everything you need to start embroidering with confidence.

Startup Project: Modern Hand Embroidery - Build your embroidery skills with a modern floral and animal pattern.

Hand Embroidery on Denim - Turn those everyday denim pieces into contemporary, one-of-a-kind creations with hand embroidery.

Map Embroidery Sampler - Stitch your story on pre-printed map fabric with this self-designed map embroidery sampler.

Design It, Stitch It: Hand Embroidery - Learn how to hand embroider over 25 types of stitches with decorative flair!

My Notes

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