

Isobel Moore



WHAT I LOOK FOR IN A SEWING MACHINE!

You can do a lot of creative embroidery just by using the “normal” presser foot and the regular automatic stitches and patterns (think: altering the width and length, overlaying patterns, changing the colour of your thread for colour mixing effects, stitching on water soluble fabric...). Any modern sewing machine, even those with a limited range of patterns, will give you a massive range of possibilities to explore.

But there will no doubt come a time when you wish to delve into the world of free motion embroidery, and other features will need to be considered.

While I won’t recommend any particular brand of sewing machine, I can tell you what features I recommend you look for in a new or second hand sewing machine. These features fall into two categories: essentials, and nice-to-have.

There are some brands that will tick all these boxes, and other brands may fall short in some aspects. As with most things, more ticked boxes means a higher price. In the end, it really does come down to your budget, and the sort of embroidery and general sewing you want to do most.

Other considerations include where you will buy the machine, and where you will need to go to have it serviced or buy spare parts and accessories.

The very best way to choose a sewing machine is to use my list and the wonders of the internet to draw up a shortlist, then try and find a retailer with demonstration machines, to get a feel for how it works. If you can, visit a stitching/creative exhibition and visit all the manufacturer stands. If you’ve done your homework ahead of time, you’re then in a good place to make a decision if they offer any show discounts or offers.

Isobel Moore

ESSENTIAL SEWING MACHINE FEATURES FOR MACHINE EMBROIDERY

Feed

Be able to drop or cover the feed dog. If you can't get the teeth to stop moving the fabric, you're really going to struggle.

Foot

You need a free motion embroidery or darning foot. While you can embroider without a foot at all, it's very risky to stitch with a bare needle, for obvious reasons (fingers). Unless the fabric is absolutely drum tight in an embroidery hoop, it will tend to pull upwards with every stitch leading to skipped stitches. A free motion foot provides slight downward pressure on the fabric, but allows you to stitch wherever you wish in a fluid and easy way.

Hoop

You need to be able to get the frame of an embroidery hoop – either a wooden hoop or a plastic/metal spring hoop – under the needle shank, either with the foot on (ideally) or without the foot if necessary.

Bed

The bed of the machine, in particular the plate covering the bobbin and the race should be smooth with all edges flush, so when you use a hoop it will not catch.

Stitching

The machine must stop stitching immediately when you want it to, and not do a few extra stitches for luck! You must be in control.

Tension

You need to be able to alter the tension of the top thread easily. If the machine alters it automatically, you need to be able to adjust it manually if you wish.

Isobel Moore

"NICE-TO-HAVE" FEATURES FOR MACHINE EMBROIDERY

Feed

Be able to drop the feed dog (instead of just covering with a plate). A plate will reduce the space under the embroidery foot and may limit your ability to achieve successful free motion embroidery, and may also catch on your embroidery hoop.

Foot

A horseshoe embroidery foot instead of an enclosed circle or plastic foot makes it much easier to see where you are stitching. In extremis, you can cut away and file smooth the front portion of a plastic foot to create your own horseshoe shaped foot.

Easy changing of presser feet – the fewer steps the better, otherwise changing them over gets very tedious.

Bed

A flat sewing machine bed (the area beyond the needleplate) with a large, flat extension table.

A shaped and curved machine bed will make it difficult to embroider with a hoop without the hoop tipping up. It is possible to purchase a made-to-measure acrylic extension table to fit the free arm of your model of machine, or for a temporary solution, you can stack large hardback books around your machine to create a flat working area.

Tension

It is very useful to be able to access the bobbin tension screw, or be able to purchase a separate bobbin case without a tension screw for using thicker threads.

Isobel Moore

"NICE-TO-HAVE" FEATURES FOR MACHINE EMBROIDERY (CONT.D)

Stitching

Be able to stitch one stitch at a time. At the very least, the machine must be able to stitch slowly enough for you to feel in complete control. Ideally, you should be able to control the speed with your foot pedal and not need a separate speed button or switch on the machine. (If you can set different machine speeds, beware the temptation to keep it at a slow setting: that's a bit like driving everywhere in second gear).

Be able to set the machine to stop with the needle down. This makes it so much easier to pause for thought (or breath) when stitching free motion embroidery without losing your place.

Be able to change the width and length of stitches in fine increments, not large jumps – and preferably down to 0 for both width/length. If you can do this in a continuous manner, ideally with a dial or knob and not buttons, even better.

It's useful to have both horizontal and vertical spool pins. Some threads, particularly metallic, work best when held vertically.

Motor and build quality

The heavier the machine, the stronger the motor and other machine parts. A strong motor will allow you many hours of stitching without overheating, and last many times longer than a cheaper, lightweight model. (A stronger machine will also be more versatile for all types of sewing, and allow you to stitch through a wider range of materials and fabrics without effort). Beware sewing machines from supermarkets and places where you wouldn't generally look to buy one!

Knee lifter

I've had one of these in the back of the cupboard for nearly 16 years, and only just discovered how useful it is to be able to lift the presser foot without taking my hands off the work! Definitely not essential, but useful if you can get one.