By Kay Gardiner and Ann Shayne

Another batch of good questions and good solutions from the Problem Ladies!

Casting About for the Right Beginnings

Q. How many different ways are there to cast on? How do I know which one to use? And why don't patterns help you out in that department?
Cast-On Confusion

A. There are eleventy-million ways to cast on, but most of them exist simply to enable a knitter to show off in front of other knitters. The Problem Ladies' policy is that unless the pattern calls for a specific cast-on, we do the first cast-on we learned: the long-tail method. (If you aren't familiar with this method, we're fairly certain that—to paraphrase Craig Ferguson— you're in Al Qaeda.).
Some patterns will specify a particular cast-on, provided there's a good reason for it, such as with lace or ribbed edgings. It makes us happy when we use a super-special cast-on, but we're not likely to worry about cast-on methods unless a designer takes us there.

The Eyelets Have It

Q. Lately I've wanted to knit nothing but lace, lace and more lace. Shawls! Shawlettes! Scarves! Stoles! They keep calling my name and my needles. My problem is that I am a T-shirt-and-jeans girl who works from home, and my family and friends aren't the lace-lovin' types.
What can I do with these gorgeous masterpieces when I'm finished?
Lavished in Lace

A. Lavished, your problem is real, and the Problem Ladies have struggled with it as well. The modern woman needs a lace shawl only when she's wearing a party dress on a cool night, and there are never as many chilly parties to attend as there are lace shawls to knit.
Our solution is to knit as many shawls as we please, and to wear them every day of the week, raffishly wrapped around our necks as scarves. True, this method of wearing does not show the lace itself to best advantage, but it really does look smashing. You are not a walking Victoria and Albert Museum; you are a human woman. It is 2010, not 1810. Scarves are IN, and knitters can have as many scarves as they want in colors, fibers and stitch patterns that the fancy shops on Madison Avenue can only dream about. At first, your inner textile preservationist will resist bunching up a beautiful lace shawl, but when you feel that beautiful halo of fluff around your neck and shoulders, and catch a glimpse of yourself in a plate-glass window looking so chic, so Of-the-

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Moment, so Semi-French—you'll quickly come around. Converting a shawl into a scarf takes off ten years and ten pounds. Just do it!

Have you noticed how goofy those knitwear models look when they're stretching out a bedspread-sized shawl so that every nupp gets its moment in the sun? There's only so much arms-wide posturing a person can do without ending up in a hug with a complete stranger. We think it's more tantalizing to wear a shawl scrooched up, all the better for that moment when somebody says, "Did you . . . knit . . . that?" Whereupon you fish out an edge and reveal your masterful OCD-I-mean-hobby. "This?" you ask. "Psh—stuff like this just falls off me when I'm walking."

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Can I Knit Him Out of My Life?

Q. Can I knit my partner a sweater if we don’t ever plan on getting married? I mean, I don't want to invoke the sweater curse or anything, but at this rate, he might not ever get a sweater otherwise! Julie

A. That depends. How much do you like this guy? How long do you want him around? The Sweater Curse, as we understand it, is not so much about getting the guy down the aisle, but about not driving him out of your life altogether. While the Problem Ladies are not superstitious, we think there is a reason that high-rise buildings may have a 12th floor, and they may have a 14th floor, but they don't have a 13th floor. Why take chances?
While the Sweater Curse is generally bemoaned as a bad thing, there is an oft-overlooked upside. Let's say a boyfriend is overstaying his welcome. (It has been known to happen.) Let's say you might even have your eye on another recipient for your affections. (This, we hear, has also happened.) Use your knitting skills to move the process along. Knit the current beau a sweater, and kiss him goodbye sooner rather than later. Think of it as voodoo for nice girls.
Another pet theory of ours is that the sweater curse is incurred when knitters create elaborate and overwrought sweaters for their boyfriends. One of us nearly lost a HUSBAND over a sweater that included, appallingly, a toggle closure in the neck area. We think that boyfriends will welcome a sweater, as long as it is gray, in stockinette, and lacks any ornamentation whatsoever including cables, bobbles, a color other than gray, or buttons. Don't think that you can slip buttons in there because they fall into the category of "fastener." Men hate buttons, and it's not worth the risk.

Lost in Labels

Q. If you've misplaced the label for a skein of yarn, how do you ever figure out the fiber content and care instructions? Thanks!
Sara

A. Provided you don't need scientific certainty, any experienced knitter, spinner or weaver can identify most pure natural fibers—cotton, silk, linen, wool, mohair, alpaca, and the like. You may get tripped up by a few (cashmere, for example, can feel like high-quality merino, and vice versa), but for the most part each fiber has distinct, easily identifiable characteristics. Things get a little trickier with wool blend, synthetic, and cellulose yarns. It's almost impossible to tell if the crazy, new plant-based yarns are made from bamboo, soy or seaweed, and you'll need an advanced degree in chemistry to distinguish between the many moods of petrochemical-based synthetics. (Not that we're insinuating that you have synthetics in your stash—labeled or not). So unless you're prepared to send your yarn to a lab, the bottom line is that once the label is gone, all that's left is an educated guess. (Though in most cases that guess will be pretty accurate.) The good news is that the care instructions are the same for almost any knittable fiber. Hand wash—without scrubbing or agitating—in tepid water using a gentle cleanser (it doesn't have to be a soap specially formulated for knits, but it can't be a detergent). Squeeze out the excess water (without wringing) and air dry on a flat surface. The Problem Ladies launder their knits this way even if the yarn label states "dry clean only." Dry cleaning is a nasty business, and we strongly suspect that manufacturers prescribe it just to protect themselves from complaints from people who are not gentle enough in their washing and drying methods.

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Visions of Knitwear Dance in Our Heads

Q. I see knitting everywhere. Should I (or my immediate family) start to worry?
Kelli Ann

A. You may want to consider the source of this answer, but the Problem Ladies think that a heightened awareness of knitting in one's environment is a mark of exquisite artistic sensibility. It is as normal for a knitter to see a watermelon rind and think "short rows" as it is for a dog to know the precise coordinates of all squirrels within a square mile. As surely as a terrier is born with squirrel GPS embedded in her small, pointy skull, the knitter's neurons are bathed in Barbara Walker, Volumes 1-4. This is perfectly normal.

I'll Never Measure Up

Q. Why do I always have problems getting the correct gauge? I have too many stitches, so I go up a needle size. I get too few, and I go down a needle size. But it seems that no matter what I do, I have the hardest time getting gauge, which is why I haven't attempted a sweater. Any suggestions would be greatly appreciated since I'm getting tired of knitting scarves. (I never get tired of knitting dishcloths.)
Yolanda

A. You had to go there, didn't you? You had to go straight to the black heart, to the unspeakable, awful truth about knitting: gauge. Gauge is the big fat lie of knitting. You can switch needles and still not get gauge. You can switch needles and get STITCH gauge, but thereby screw up your ROW gauge. You can even get two (or three or four) different gauges within the same garment, for Pete's sake. You might be one of those people who gets perfect gauge on swatches, but never on the actual project. Meditate on this (we believe it, and it may even be true): Every knitter has gauge issues. And at some point or another, everybody gets gauge wrong.

So why do people still knit sweaters, and how do they manage to knit sweaters that fit? For the Problem Ladies, a multi-pronged approach, using both the left and right sides of the brain, works best. Use these tactics, as needed, individually or in combination:

1. Loosen up your mental definitions of concepts like "fit" and "gauge." Get close enough, and be happy. The sweater wants the gauge the sweater wants, and it is up to you to like it. Corollary: knit sweaters that are not fitted.
2. Worry less about hitting the pattern's prescribed gauge and focus on achieving the prescribed dimensions. If the garment pieces are the right measurements for your body, the sweater is likely to fit. When you count your gauge, either on the swatch or as you begin to

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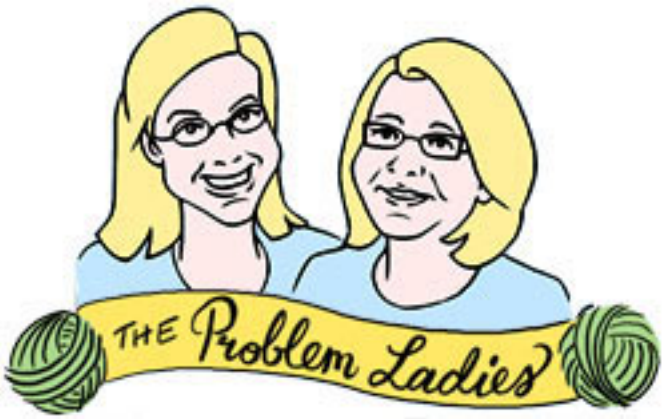
work the garment, be honest. Don't pretend that a half stitch either way doesn't matter. The difference between 4.5 stitches and 5 stitches to the inch is that the garment is going to be ten percent bigger or smaller—and ten percent is a big difference. If your gauge is wrong, but the fabric is fine and you don't want to fuss with it, you can still knit to the correct measurements, simply by changing the size of the sweater you knit. This requires an honest gauge count and a little math to figure out which size you should choose to get the measurements you need. For example, if the measurements for the size Large sweater will fit you, but your gauge is too big, don't knit the size Large! Do a little figuring (multiply the number of stitches at the waist, bust or hem of the sweater by your true gauge), and knit a size that will fit better. It will be the Medium or even the Small. Your body doesn't know it's a size Large; it only knows what its measurements are.

3. If you've got a big stash, try getting gauge with a different yarn. Remember that the gauge range on the yarn label can be very different from your gauge. The Problem Ladies have found that English yarn labels often assume a tighter gauge than colonial knitters typically get, and their yarns are labeled accordingly. Knowledge is power. Based on this knowledge, when we're knitting a Rowan pattern in a Rowan yarn, we never even try to get gauge with the prescribed needle size; we start off one or even two needle sizes smaller, or (see Number 2) we knit the smaller size.
4. Knit your sweaters top-down, in the round, so that you can try them on as you go, and make increases or decreases to correct the size. This requires its own brand of patience and care, but for some knitters it's the secret to a good fit.



Knit Strong! Keep those cards and letters coming in to problemladies@twistcollective.com