By Kay Gardiner and Ann Shayne

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

Needling Issues

What do you do when you want to start a project and you can find that little package that the circular needles you need came in, but the actual needles are in another project? And this happens over and over again—no matter how much you try to need the needles you do have, you end up needing the ones you don't have. Do you buy more needles? Please don't tell me to finish one project before I start another. I already have a mom.
Carin

It would be most hypocritical of the Problem Ladies to tell you to finish one project before you start another. We don't do that ourselves, except by accident. Besides, casting on a fresh new project while you are mired in the sloggy part of an old project is the best way we know of to keep the joy of knitting alive in your heart. You WILL finish that older project. You just won't finish it right this minute. Knitting is your hobby, not your job. You have the right to enjoy yourself. When you reach a certain number of WIPs (a tipping point that varies widely from knitter to knitter), you will feel an overpowering urge to finish something. Meanwhile, don't deny yourself the fun of casting on something new just because it may require some needle scavenging.

Although buying new needles is a pretty good option, if you already have six sets of size-5s acquiring another set may upset the ghost of your frugal great-grandma. Thankfully there is another solution and it requires only ordinary items found in any (knitter's) home: waste yarn and a blunt tapestry needle. Just run a strand of waste yarn through the stitches on the needle, tie the ends of the waste yarn together, and remove the needle from the stitches. The live stitches will wait securely on that string until kingdom come or until you return to finish the project, whichever comes first.

And here's a tip for avoiding the knitter's nightmare of returning to this WIP at some distant future date with no memory of what size needles you yanked out of the project: tie knots in the end of the waste yarn indicating what size needle you were using. You'll have to use U.S. sizes for this, though—we're not sure how to tie 3.75 knots in a piece of yarn. We do this on swatches too, as a hedge against creeping senility. Please don't remind us of the possibility that we may return to this project decades from now and wonder why there are all these annoying knots in an otherwise perfectly good piece of yarn.

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Count Me In

When counting rows, does the row on the needles count, and when is the cast-on row counted?
Ruth

Yes, the row on the needle counts as a row. Why wouldn't it? It's a row. Whether you count the cast-on row is not as clear; it depends on the situation. If the knitting is plain stockinette, the Problem Ladies doubt that the cast-on row counts. If it's garter stitch, and you used the long-tail cast on, and you're counting ridges, the cast-on row does count, because it forms the first ridge on the right side of the knitting. When counting rows in any stitch pattern, what usually matters most is that you count them consistently on pieces of the garment that will have to be sewn to each other later, such as the back and front(s), or pieces such as sleeves or legs, which are expected to match each other in length.

They Grow Up So Fast

Can you recommend a way to enlarge patterns written for babies so that they will fit toddlers (aside from using thicker yarn and needles and hoping for the best)? I finished a lot of projects for my baby while I was pregnant, but my pace slowed considerably after she was born. I have all these cute patterns meant for babies that she'll never wear (sniff).
Sara

[Wiping XXL Problem Lady tears for poor baby who has outgrown all her handknits.] It's often quite easy to upsize a pattern from baby to toddler, especially if the item is a sweater, jacket or dress. (Pants or leggings present more difficulties because baby pants typically are shaped to accommodate a diaper and chubby legs. Toddlers thin out in both the derriere and the legs as they grow; adjustments for these changes would require a lot more thinking through.) Because baby sweaters typically lack shaping, it is simply a matter of adding stitches and rows. The basic dimensions that you need to adjust are the chest/belly circumference and the length of body and sleeves. Figure out both your stitches and rows per inch and the inches in both length and girth that the sweater needs if it is to fit your toddler, and then add the right number of stitches and rows. It's also wise to remember that there are plenty of adorable patterns written for toddlers, and you don't want to miss out on those, either.

Backward Loop Cast-On Dread

I feel like a goofball because I can't get a good cast-on of 30 stitches at the end of a row of knitting—which, after they're knit, are to be joined. My 67 attempts at backwards loop each resulted in a frail piece of mess. Any obvious, or even goofy, secret ways of success out there? Thanks Ladies!

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Denise F. in Charlottesville, VA

Ah, the wobbly mess of a bunch of backwards-loop cast-on stitches at the end of the row. We feel your pain: with each stitch that you knit, the length of excess yarn between the cast-on stitches grows. There is a lack of the minimum firmness that is so essential to a cast-on.

We offer three thoughts:

First, let us present a reason (possibly) not to care. If you are going to be picking up from this cast-on later for any reason (such as to knit on a collar or an edging), that may go a long way toward curing or camouflaging any looseness or unevenness. One of the Problem Ladies once knit a pullover in which, after knitting the front and back of the sweater from the bottom up, dolman sleeves were constructed by casting on seven stitches at the end of each row, many times. As instructed, the intrepid Problem Lady used the backward-loop method, and she fretted about the floppy edges created by all those seven-stitch cast-ons. But when she seamed the edges, poof! The floppiness disappeared into the underside of the sleeve, never to be seen again.

Second, the other Problem Lady despises backward-loop cast-on. She exhorts you to try a knitted cast-on. Here's how. (This assumes that you are right handed, or at least knit with the yarn in your right hand.) You arrive at the moment when you need to cast on new stitches at the end of the row. Flip the needle with all your just-completed stitches, so that it is now in your left hand, with the working yarn dangling from that final stitch. To cast on a stitch, insert your empty needle into the last stitch, knit it, then place the newly created stitch back onto the left needle. Repeat until you have the number of stitches you need. This knitted cast-on creates a somewhat sturdier stitch. It's no long-tail cast-on, mind you, but it'll get you where you need to go.

Third, TechKnitter's solution is a clever one. Rather than dilute it by describing it, we're simply going to point you to http://techknitting.blogspot.com/2008/12/casting-on-additional-stitches-at-end.html.

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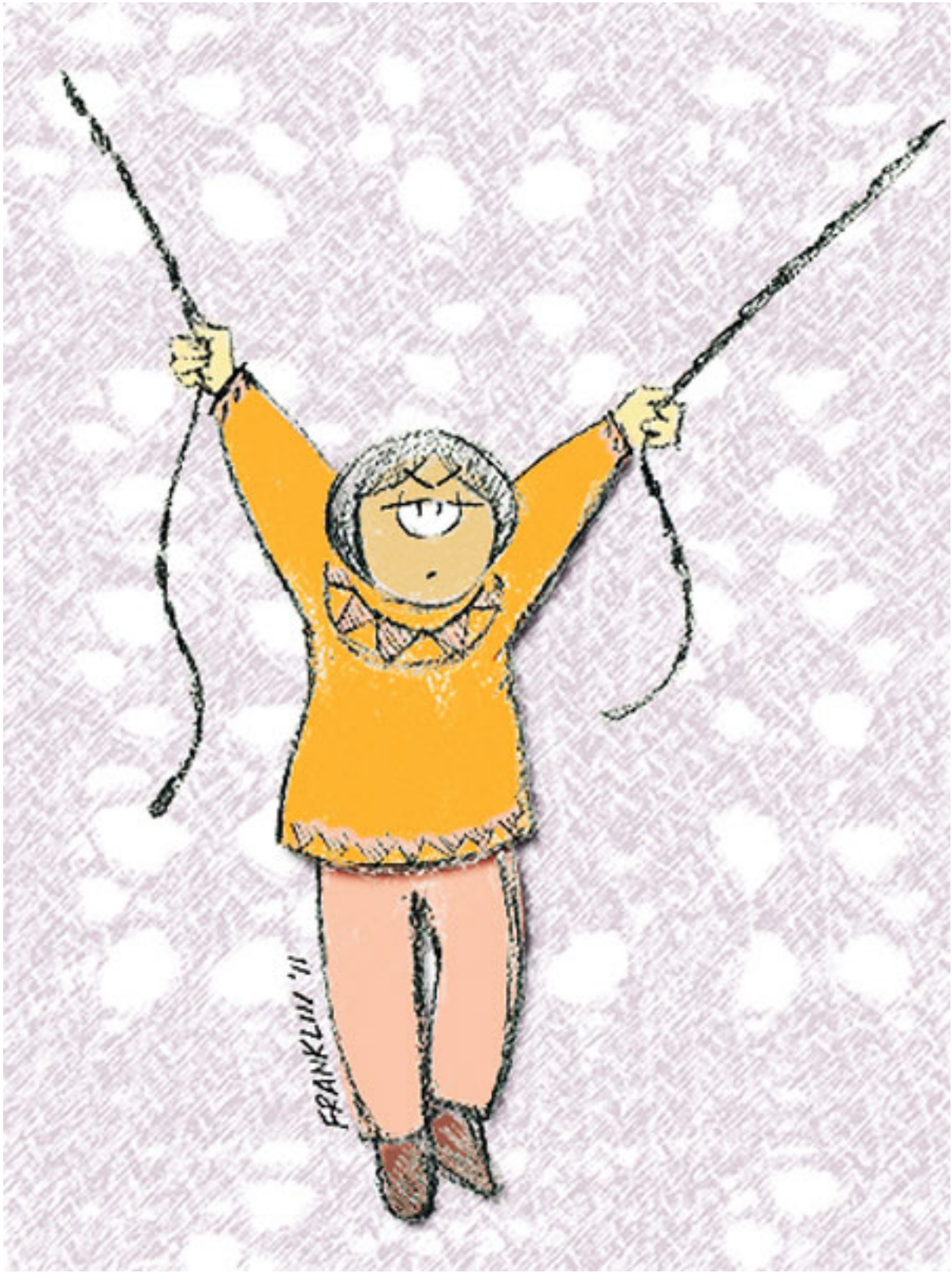
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The End Is Near—How Do I Deal With This?

How do you join a new length of yarn when you are working a lace pattern? Should I introduce it at the beginning of the row, in the row, spit-splice, weave-in? I know how to start a new ball and hide the ends successfully in garter stitch, stockinette and cables, but openwork mystifies me. Won't the end pop out and look horrible?

Thanks for your help.
The End Is Near (and Likely to Pop Out)

There are good solutions for this one, but they don't all work, all the time. Here are the Problem Ladies' favorite ways of dealing with joining in new yarn when working lace, in order of preference. We recommend that you do the first one that is available to you in your particular Knitting Drama:

1. The Spit Splice. If you are knitting with a yarn that felts, you can spit-splice the old end to the new end. This is the Problem Ladies' preferred method, because except for an almost-imperceptible thickening of the yarn at the point of the splice, it doesn't show. If you've done it right, and those two ends are bonded together by moisture and friction, it's a durable, permanent join. It works for natural sheep's wool that is not labeled "superwash," and for most other animal fibers, such as cashmere and mohair. Sometimes it even works for blends of animal fibers with non-feltable fibers such as silk, cotton or synthetics, so try it and see. (The technique is easy. Saturate the two ends to be joined. In the palm of one hand, overlap the two wet ends so that when joined, the strand will be continuous. Rub vigorously for a few seconds, until you feel the ends felting together. Rub a little more. Wet a little more and repeat if necessary. Continue knitting as if nothing ever happened.)
2. The Russian Join. Okay, we admit that we are fans of any ethnic knitting technique. The more obscure, the better. The further east from North America, the better. Latvian, Estonian, Turkish, Finnish—it's all good. So of course we love the Russian Join, as Ann Yotter demonstrates here: http://www.knittinganyway.com/freethings/russianjoin.htm. BUT, the Russian Join is our second choice because it's fiddlier. You have to use sewing needles, and delve into the plies of the yarn. Who has the time? But if the spit-splice doesn't apply to your situation, the Russian Join should fix you up.
3. Join at the Edge. Drop the old yarn at the beginning or end of a row, pick up the new yarn, leaving four-inch (10cm) tails for both, keep on knitting, and weave in the ends later on the wrong side of the work. This works well if the garment is going to be seamed, and on shawls with garter borders, where it's easy to disguise the weaving of the end.
4. Join Mid-row. Drop the old yarn in a spot that is as far as possible from the nearest yarn-over or other open stitch pattern, pick up the new yarn, leaving four-inch (10cm) tails for both, keep on knitting, and weave in the ends later on the wrong side of the work or wherever you can hide the ends in plain sight. This is not the greatest solution in the world, however. We have done this on two occasions, in both cases because yarn was running

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out and pure desperation had set in.

Reblocking a Lace Shawl: Do I Hafta?

Probably a dumb question, but still: do you re-block a lace shawl every time you wash it? I haven't knit any lace shawls yet, and I find that the prospect of pinning out hundreds of peaky ends each time I wash my shawl-to-be makes me feel dizzy.
Andrea in Argentina

We begin by admiring your concern for a handknit you have not yet made. This sort of advance planning will serve you well throughout your life, especially in the areas of personal relationships and the purchase of tickets to hot concerts. Thinking ahead! What a concept! How many trips to juvenile detention could have been avoided by simply asking the question: am I old enough to be doing this?

As for this hypothetical lace shawl, we're wondering how dirty it's actually going to get. We have a number of lace shawls, scarves, shawlettes and doily-esque creations that don't really get washed all that often, because they don't seem to need it. If you minimize the weeping into the handknit, and the use of the handknit as a handkerchief, it will stay considerably fresher.

That said, there will come a time when your crisp yarn-overs start to sag and collapse; to droop when they formerly draped. Yes, it is kind of a pain to pin out the thing all over again. But it's necessary, most of the time, if you want all that insane lacery to be visible. Besides, knitting a laceshawl isn't exactly easy either—are you doing this because you need an actual garment, or because it's kind of a great hobby? If you start looking at all this too closely, it starts to feel like that college seminar in existentialism. Just pin it—and love the fact that you made this absurdly impractical thing.

Yarn is like milady's hair, you know; it needs a good trip to the beauty parlor to look its best. (Aqua Net optional, of course.) You will marvel at your cleverness when you see all those nupps and leaves and flower baskets and arrowheads all tidied up.

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