

In for a pinnie, in for a poundie...



I didn't make these pincushions, they are part of my collection. They were gifts from dear friends.



This is one of my favorites - I bought it from Victoria, [the Silly BooDilly](#). I am in love with her work - and this pincushion is a daily reminder to think outside the box... to crash through the sides of the box and turn it upside down.

So as I sit here trying to figure out where to start with this, I have run into a few snags. What should I include? How should I organize it? What would be the most useful?

The biggest problem is obvious - I'm not an expert when it comes to making pincushions. Most of what I have to share falls into the category of "this is what works for me". Through trial and error, experiments and seriously goofy results, I've learned what doesn't work for me and more importantly, I've learned how to get something to look the way I want it to. Mostly. Three-out-of-four times.

The most important thing I've learned is this - the only opinion that matters is mine. Or yours. It doesn't matter if the finished pincushion is wonky, crooked and badly stitched - if you love it and it makes you smile, that's really the only thing that matters. I should know because I have some of those pincushions and I can't bear to part with them. They've got character. Some of them have even been published. So let's start with some tools and my preferred materials.



None of these are necessary but I find all of them useful - and I do use them. The bamboo knitting needles and stuffing forks are terrific for stuffing - even pincushions filled with crushed walnut shells get a little bit of stuffing or batting. The bamboo point-turner is for pushing out corners - gently. The hemostat is useful for turning pincushions right-side-out and for helping pull needles through seams while stitching the opening closed. The long doll-making needles at the bottom are for those times when you want to do the sectioning with perle cotton. (More on that later.)

Batting. I happily use the pieces trimmed off after quilting but I also have batting on hand that I use just for quilted pincushions. This is what I use.



Also not necessary - but what I like about this one - and Mountain Mist Blue Ribbon - is that it is thin and gets soft and quilt-y when washed. It also shrinks nicely.

Stuffing. In addition to crushed walnut shells, I also use a little bit of cotton stuffing for most pincushions. (More on that later too.)



Nope - also not required. What I like about cotton stuffing is that it isn't quite as springy or clingy as polyester or bamboo stuffing. There may be other brands but this is the one I find fairly easily. Wool batting that has been torn into small bits and pieces also works nicely though the pieces can compact down quite a bit so you might need a lot of it.

Now let's start with something for the top of the pincushion. Anything works - wool or cotton, silk matka or linen. A block or stitchery - pieced or stitched - quilted or not. Foundation pieced or just plain old-pieced-the-regular-way. The tops of some pincushions are "finished" just the way they are - wool appliqué, foundation-pieced ~ like some of the Tuffets, and so on.



For those other kinds of pieced tops, I have two choices - I can quilt it or leave it un-quilted. Both can be filled and stuffed the same way, the primary difference is how the finished pincushion is going to look. If I choose not to quilt the block, I am still going to line it with muslin.

The muslin I like to use isn't the "good stuff" from the quilt shop. Since I don't want to add any more bulk to the seam than necessary, I use a piece of thin muslin from the "big box" store. It's about \$3.00 a yard

and I usually have some on hand in white and natural. The primary purpose of the muslin is to give me a little bit smoother look and feel to the outside of the pincushion. It's the pinnie equivalent of Spanx.



By lining, I don't mean a separate muslin pouch that will go inside the pincushion. I mean that this block is centered on a piece of muslin measuring about 6" x 6". I stitch around the four edges about 1/8" away from the edge. This serves absolutely no purpose other than to keep the two layers together while I finish piecing the pincushion. After stitching around the edge, the whole thing is trimmed square and to the edge. If you want to round the corners - now is the time to mark and stitch that.

I do the same kind of lining for any pincushion that isn't quilted or foundation-pieced on muslin. Wool, linen and silk matka tops all get a "backing" of muslin before the top is stitched to the backing. The other option is quilting the top - and possibly even the back - of the pincushion. I use the thin batting and the thin muslin to layer the pieced top and then I machine-quilt it as desired. If the machine quilting isn't quite as perfect as you would like it to be, just tell the critics that you were going for a "primitive look". That's what I do.

Once the front - and perhaps the backing - are quilted, I like to "shrink" the quilted pieces using a technique I learned several years ago in a class at [Buggy Barn Quilts](#) taught by Virginia Cole of the [Gallopig Pony](#).



I start with quilted pieces - in this case, the front and the back. The "little quilts" are then wet completely and washed by hand. I use a little bit of hand soap and really wash them to give them a little bit of a "used" look. After they are rinsed until no soap residue remains, the pieces are rolled in dry towels to wring out any extra water.



Then it gets scrunched -- wadded up.



Then the piece is pressed with a hot, dry iron. Gently, carefully block it into shape. Then scrunch it tightly again - gloves or teflon-fingers help. Then press it - gently blocking it as you go. Then scrunch it again. And so on. The goal is to keep pressing and scrunching until the quilted piece is completely dry - while also pressing in some of the wrinkles. Washing and drying the pieces in the washer and dryer will give it a similar look but this is faster, and the finished look really is a bit different.



These have been "shrunk" - a star block that measured $5\frac{1}{2}'' \times 5\frac{1}{2}''$ before the shrinking process measure $5'' \times 5''$ after.

Backing. The one thing that applies across the board is this - when I'm piecing square or rectangular pincushions, my backing piece is always cut a bit bigger than the front/top piece by at least $\frac{1}{2}''$. No matter what I use, and no matter I do with/to it, the backing is always a bit bigger because it makes assembling the front and back easier.

Note: The $\frac{1}{2}''$ larger backing piece is not eased to fit the front. The larger-than-necessary backing piece lets me lay the finished "top" on top of the backing with right sides together and have about $\frac{1}{4}''$ excess on all four sides. The extra gives me a little leeway as the multiple layers sometimes like to "creep" while they're being joined, and it provides a little larger seam allowance when closing the pincushion.

As for the types of fabrics, this is what I think about the options.

Tightly woven fabrics like cotton quilting fabrics, twill and cotton velveteen work really well. When they are used plain - not quilted - I always line the backing in the same way as I did for the top/front. It means I don't have to worry about how tight the weave of the fabric is, and it improves the feel and appearance of the surface.

Felted wool is a wonderful pincushion backing but there are a few things I have to share on this subject. First, the wool has to be felted and not all wool that you can buy in quilt shops has been felted. Some wool is partially felted by the dye process but even the wool that is felted may not be felted enough. Though maybe I should write that another way - I prefer it when it has been felted "more". It's simple - wool that I buy that has been felted through the dye process always shrinks more when I do the hot wash/cold rinse/hot dryer process. It also feels different - it's softer, fluffier and the weave is a little tighter. That definitely doesn't work for rug hookers and it may not be desirable for some wool appliqué, but it works wonderfully for wool used for pincushion backings.



A wool backing used on a pincushion with a fabric front has a nice little bonus - the wool stretches a bit and sometimes that makes it easier to get a well-filled, somewhat firm pincushion.

Sewing the front to the back is easy - mostly. If you have a square block that needs to stay perfectly square, it's easy. Right sides together - $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance all around with a $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to 2" opening. But what happens if you don't want the pointy corners?



Did you ever make a knife-edge pillow and wind up with four kind of funny-looking pointy corners?

That happens with pincushions too. If the block is such that I can taper the corners a bit, I do that.

To taper the corner, I mark a point that is about $\frac{1}{8}$ " inside the corner. Then on the outside edge of the top, I draw a line that starts at the edge about 1" away from the point and draw it to the point. I then cut on that line. I do the same thing on the adjacent edge so that the corner has lost its 90-degree angle. That is repeated on the remaining three corners. I then stitch $\frac{1}{4}$ " from the cut edge just as I do to sew a seam on a quilt top.

It doesn't completely eliminate the pointy corner but it helps.



The top is then layered to the backing with right sides together.

If I have lined the top and/or backing, I should see only the muslin lining. The two layers are sewn with a scant $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance leaving a 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ " to 2" opening in one side. I like to double-stitch the corners so that they are a bit more secure as I will need to trim the seam fairly close to the point and then use a little bit of pressure to push them out.

Before I turn the pincushion right-side out, I like to fold back the edges at the opening and press the fold. I can see the edge easily and this will make it a bit easier to find the proper line for stitching the pincushion closed. When the pincushion is turned right-side out, I use the point turner and the knitting needles to push out the corners and the sides. Then the pincushion is pressed. The opening is pressed again.



About the size of the opening to leave - bigger makes it easier to turn the pincushion right-side out but smaller is easier to stitch closed.

When it comes to stitching the pincushion closed, there is one absolute truth I have learned. If you are making this pincushion as a gift, your stitches are going to show. No matter how tiny my stitches and how perfectly matched my thread, there are times when the stitches show and the closing seam is a bit puckered. It happens. That's life. So tack stitch or blind stitch, cross-stitch or hem-stitch, I've decided not to worry about it too much. Neatness counts... strive for perfection... closed is what really matters.

Using felted wool for the backing does the best job for hiding the stitches for the seam closure. Second best is to use a backing that is very close in color and shade to the fabric on the front. As you stitch the opening closed, the thread will get caught on the corner about nine out of ten times. (Or maybe that's just me.)

If failing to achieve absolute perfection bothers you, you might consider celebrating the closing seam by highlighting it - hide it in plain sight, so to speak.



This was the "finish" over a closing seam on a pincushion I was given a few years ago. The stitching covers just the place where the pincushion was stitched closed. Is this not just the cleverest thing ever?

That's all I have got for now but more is coming. Next time I'll tell you everything I don't know about fillings and stuffings. Then I'll tell you about my adventures with round pincushions and why learning how to do the sectioning thing with perle cotton is a really good thing. (I'll give you a hint - camouflage.) So what did I forget so far? More importantly, what did I get wrong?