

# SEWING WITH SILK

By RENEE POTTLE



**S**ilk. The mere word creates a vision of cascading softness and elegance, but its popularity goes beyond luxury. Like other natural fibers, silk breathes, making it the perfect choice for both warm winter underclothes or cool summer tank tops. It doesn't pill, and its fiber dyes to beautiful, bright colors rarely seen in other fibers. Silk can be worn as a casual blouse with denim or transformed into the most formal evening gown. Functional and durable, it has a great variety of uses and comes in many forms.

## SILK FABRIC TYPES

The finest silk fibers are produced by "cultivated" silkworms grown in a controlled environment. The worms are fed a diet of mulberry leaves and increase their body size 10,000 times in their short life span. After the cocoon is spun and prior to the worm hatching into a moth, the cocoon is soaked in hot water then unraveled, producing filaments up to a mile long.

Like other fibers, silk can be woven or knit into a variety of fabrics. Although we tend to think of silk fabrics as light and delicate, there are medium- and heavyweight silk fabrics also.

■ **Charmeuse.** When we think of silk this is often the fabric that come to mind. The back of the fabric is a flattened crepe while the front is a shimmery satin weave.

Charmeuse has even more drape than crepe de chine and works well for scarves, blouse and lingerie. Look for patterns that are loose and flowing or have soft gathers, but avoid pleats as the fabric drapes too easily to hold the shape. Use the "with nap" pattern layout to prevent color distortion.

■ **China silk.** Chins silk is a lightweight, sheer, plain-weave fabric. It's sometimes referred to as habutai, but unlike true habitual, it's very lustrous and smooth. Most often found dyed in soft pastel colors, it's one of the less expensive and more commonly available silk fabrics.

Choose Chine silk for scarves, soft blouse and to line vest and jackets. Gathers and tucks hold well in this fabric, but it isn't recommended for fitted garment styles because the seams will tear from stress.

■ **Crepe de chine.** Crepe de chine is a lightweight fabric made by twisting some

fibers clockwise and others counterclockwise. The twisted fibers are then woven in a plain-weave fabric, but it's the twisted fibers, not the weave, that gives crepe its distinctive "pebbly" feel. Both sides of the fabric look and feel the same.

Crepe de chine drapes beautifully and works well for looks, bias-cut skirts, blouses and dresses. Look for patterns with soft gathers or pleats that can be pressed, but refrain from tailored styles because the fabric is too soft to hold a structures shape. Crepe de chine doesn't ravel as easily as other silk fabrics, but it will tear if not handled gently.

■ **Douppioni.** Douppioni is a plain-weave fabric with slubbed ribs. It has a stiff, taffeta-like hand and is usually dyed in bright colors.

Douppioni makes up well into semi-tailored garments like vests and dresses. It can be gathered, but the gathers will be large and may overpower the design. Douppioni is often made into elegant evening gowns –

just make sure the style isn't too fitted, as the fabric doesn't stand up well to stress and ravel easily.

*Always practice stitching on a fabric sample first. The few minutes spent practicing will save you time and frustration later.*

It's often recommended that douppioni be dry-cleaned to resist abrasions. However, you can wash douppioni with positive results, just be sure to serge the raw edges first to prevent



raveling. Washing will make the fabric lose some of its stiffness, which may be desirable depending on your preference, and the color will often soften as the excess dye is washed away. As with all silks, it will shrink, so pre-treat it before cutting out the pattern.

- **Noil.** Silk noil is made from the short fibers left after combing and carding so it doesn't shine like many other silk fabric. Noil looks similar to cotton, but has the soft feel of silk against the skin. It also drapes better than cotton and resists wrinkling, so it's the perfect choice when traveling.

Silk noil can be used for either pleated or gathered-styled blouses, skirts, dresses, slacks and unstructured jackets, but be sure to pretreat the fabric before cutting out the pattern. It can be machine washed on gentle and dried on low, but this will cause a faded, "weathered" look. If you prefer bright colors, dry-clean or hand wash.

- **Raw silk.** Raw silk is any silk yarn or fabric that hasn't had the sericin – the natural "gum" that protects the fiber – removed. The fabric is stiff and dull and the sericin tends to attract dirt and odors.
- **Shantung.** Once made from hand-reeled tussah silk, today's shantung is usually made with cultivated silk warp yarns and heavier douppioni filling yarns. Depending on the filling yarn, shantung may be lustrous or dull.

Because of its firm, semi-crisp hand, shantung gathers and pleats into crisp

fullness. It also tends to ravel, so avoid close-fitting styles.

- **Tussah.** Tussah silk, often called shantung, is made from the cocoons of wild tussah silkworms who eat oak and juniper leaves. Because the worm isn't grown in a controlled environment, the moth hatched from the cocoon and interrupts the filament length. As a result, the fibers are short and coarse instead of long and lustrous.

Tussah silk is difficult to dye and is most often available in its natural color, a creamy tan. Because of its irregular slubs and the fact that it ravel easily, tussah should be dry-cleaned.

Tussah makes beautiful jackets and tailored dresses and is a good choice for traveling as it doesn't wrinkle easily. Because it doesn't stretch or gather well, choose patterns that are shaped by seams, and be aware that sleeves may be hard to set in. The ribs also have a tendency to slip, so pin well or baste before stitching.

## SEWING SILK FABRICS

- If the fabric has a slippery quality, pin it to a sheet before cutting out the pattern. The sheet will stabilize the fabric.
- To eliminate slippage while sewing, use a flat-bottomed presser foot and tighten the presser foot pressure.
- Pin lightweight silks and douppioni in the seam allowances. Many people use short, thin silk pins, but you can use any type of pin as long as it's sharp and free from burrs.
- Make sure your sewing machine is clean and free of lint.
- It isn't necessary to use silk thread when sewing silk fabrics. A thinner, good quality 100-percent polyester thread works well.
- Use sharp scissors when cutting out your pattern. Sharp scissors cut easily, limiting fabric movement.
- For lightweight fabrics, use a new, sharp 9/65 machine needle; for medium- and heavyweight fabrics, use a 12/80 machine needle.
- For lightweight fabrics, use a throatplate with a small hole so the fabric doesn't get pulled into the hole.

If you only have a zigzag plate, cover the larger hole with clear tape.

- If puckered seams are a problem, or you're having trouble feeding the fabric into the machine, place tear-away stabilizer or tissue paper on both sides of the seam.
- Mark lightweight silks with tailor's tasks or dressmaker's chalk.
- Finish seams with serging or use French seams to prevent raveling. Consider adding an additional 7/8" (6mm) to seam allowances when cutting out fabrics that ravel easily, such as douppioni, noil and tussah.
- Practice on a fabric sample first. The few minutes spent practicing will save you time and frustration later.

## SOURCE

If the silk fabric you're looking for isn't available locally, check with the following source:



## Thai Silks!

Silk yardage and artist items. Contact them for a free brochure.

252 State Street  
Los Altos, CA 94011  
phone (800) 722-7455  
email: silks@thaisilks.com

Order online at:  
[www.thaisilks.com](http://www.thaisilks.com)

## CARING FOR SILK FABRICS

- Silk is extremely strong, but repeated exposure to the sun will erode the fiber. As a result, silk fabrics are poor choices for curtains and draperies.
- Some silk yardage and clothing can be hand washed if done carefully. Use a mild detergent and lukewarm water, then roll the fabric in a towel to absorb the water. Iron dry on a low setting. If you're unsure about washing your yardage, test a swatch first.
- Structured silk garments and fragile fabrics should be dry cleaned to prevent damage. Multi-color prints may need to be dry-cleaned to prevent running.
- Moths will attack silk, as well as wool. Store your silk clothing appropriately.
- Never use chlorine bleach on silk. It will yellow the fiber.