

"I've come up to ask you to go for one of our old-time rambles through September woods and "over the hills where spices grow," this afternoon,' said Gilbert coming suddenly around the porch corner. 'Suppose we visit Hester Gray's garden.'

Anne, sitting on the stone step with her lap full of a pale, filmy, green stuff, looked up rather blankly.

'Oh, I wish I could,' she said slowly, 'but I really can't, Gilbert. I'm going to Alice Penhallow's wedding this evening, you know. I've got to do something to this dress, and by the time it's finished I'll have to get ready. I'm so sorry. I'd love to go.'"

- Anne of the Island, Lucy Maud Montgomery

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is episode 63 - Sewing for Style and Economy. Today I'm going to share some tips for making and mending clothing, housewares, and even some crafting without it costing the Earth.

Before we do that, I'd like to ask you to take a quick moment to rate and review the podcast. It really DOES help with "discoverability," especially if multiple reviews are added in a short period of time. So if you haven't had a chance to add yours yet, please do!

All right, now back to our regularly scheduled topic. Last week was all about ways to economize, and when I talked about clothing I briefly mentioned that sewing your own clothes CAN be an economy, although that's not necessarily always the case. And I think it's a relatively new phenomenon for handmade, homemade clothing to BE as or even MORE expensive than purchased clothing. The same is true for housewares. There are some reasons for that. And some things to address.

We've gotten so used to cheap clothing, that we sometimes overlook the processes that got us here. Department store (or Big Box Store) clothing is as inexpensive as it is because it's so cheaply made. Beginning with cheap fabrics and materials, which are made with astonishingly cheap labor, and designed in standardized sizes to utilize economy of scale.

Handsewn clothing, on the other hand, can be (and usually is) made from better materials, custom fitted to the wearer. More, extra fabric can be added to accommodate

future alterations. Like tucks that can be let down to add length for growing children, or wide seam allowances to let out later on. Or can be more easily "made over" into a new style, as Anne is probably doing in our opening quote.

So let's talk about some of the factors that make home sewing so expensive, and then some ways to mitigate those issues.

If you are going to make a garment, generally you will need a few things - a pattern, fabric, thread, and notions - elastic, buttons, zippers, seam binding, or whatever is called for. All of those things can be QUITE expensive, but they don't have to be.

First - patterns. If you've been in a modern fabric store, you've no doubt encountered mainstream sewing patterns. The usual brands are McCall's, Butterick, Simplicity (often called The Big Three), and Vogue. Some stores will also carry Burda or other smaller pattern lines. At this point, The Big Three are all owned by the same parent company. They don't really differ too much, each including a multi-sized tissue paper pattern and a couple pages of instructions. Vogue will have similar contents, but tend to be more complex garments - usually with better construction methods.

I've sewn a lot of Big Three patterns, and still do from time to time. Rule one - never pay full price for a pattern. There's just no excuse for it. They're certainly not worth the \$16-25 that they supposedly retail for. Be aware that patterns are "loss leaders" for fabric stores. If you buy the pattern, you're probably going to also buy the materials to make it before you leave. So, most stores offer these patterns for 40% off as a general rule. And JoAnns, at least, will usually offer them for \$1 each from time to time. Watch the sale flyers, and stock up when they're least expensive.

But also be aware that The Big Three, and even Vogue (which are never available for \$1) are not the only game in town. Expand your view.

The first alternative to buying new commercial patterns is buying vintage commercial patterns. You can find older patterns in all kinds of places - thrift stores, garage sales, vintage and antique stores, eBay, Etsy, and all kinds of other markets for second-hand items.

Things to look for in vintage patterns:

Styles. Look for classic pieces, or deliberate vintage items if that's your jam. Yes, there are some really terrible patterns out there. The home sewing pattern market follows the ready-to-wear trends. So every bad idea that appeared in stores probably had a corresponding pattern.

Make sure all the pieces are there. Most of the time, online sellers will include this in the description. In person, check the envelope or concede the fact that you're taking a risk that your \$0.50 pattern might end up with a missing piece.

Sizing. Modern sizing and vintage sizing aren't the same. And I can't give you any conversion rule of thumb. Always go by the measurements. Vintage patterns are also less likely to be multi-size. If you're going to make a habit of using vintage patterns, it's worthwhile to master the slash-and-spread method of enlarging or shrinking patterns.

The directions in vintage patterns may be quite different than you're familiar with. Sewing techniques have been "simplified" in the least 30-50 years or so. Or might even call for the use of a notion that's difficult to come by. Be prepared to learn or adapt.

Take into account what underpinings ought to be. In other words, you won't get a REAL vintage fit in modern underwear. Set your expectations accordingly, or commit to making the right foundation garments, too.

If vintage isn't your game, try surfing online for independent pattern lines. There are a lot of them out there, selling all sorts of unique sewing patterns. Most of them are offered as pdf downloads. You can print them out on a home printed, tape the sheets together, and go to town. I finally invested in a home laser Black and White printer for this purpose, as it's much more efficient for ink use that way.

Some of these pattern lines also now offer their wares as files that can be printed on single sheets at a local print shop or used with a projector directly onto the fabric.

Online patterns are usually modern styles, with new introductions all the time. They use modern sizing and techniques, as well as currently available notions and fabrics. And you can print a new copy whenever you like, since you own the file.

Another pattern source are books and magazines from other countries. For whatever reason, sewing magazines elsewhere are much more prone to include patterns than

American magazines. I'm particularly fond of Japanese mags and books. There are lots of comfortable and simple styles, with new issues being released all the time.

The downsides here are, obviously, the language issue. But most of the books have excellent illustrations. Plus, there is a google translate app for phones that uses the camera function to scan your book and provide a translated text. I find I can successfully navigate without undue frustration.

Another is sizing. Japanese books usually top out at a US size 8 or 10. Again, you can alter the patterns without too much fuss, but just bear in mind that "S-XL" on the cover doesn't mean US sizing.

And, of course, if you've come far enough in your sewing journey that you can perform all of those alterations, you can probably just as readily draft your own patterns. I recommend the "Metric Pattern Cutting" series of books for instructions on making basic pattern blocks and adjusting them to your needs. I'll like them in the show notes. It's not difficult, just a little tedious. And, of course, you'll need to know exactly what you want in a garment.

Once you have your pattern, you need fabric. While on one hand, this is "the fun part," it can also be intensely frustrating. Especially if your primary fabric source is Big box stores.

Natural fibers will always be more comfortable to wear than synthetics. The sheerest polyester chiffon will be hotter to wear than a more substantial cotton seersucker. And poly gab much colder in the winter than wool. A little poly will help fight wrinkles, but you will trade a bit of thermal comfort. Choose wisely.

Not all natural fibers are created equal, either. I try not to make garments out of quilting cottons, in general. Just because they're prone to some wrinkling and developing creases in hems and sleeves that are hard to press out. But it's also true that higher quilting cottons usually only available from dedicated independent stores are much nicer than the quilting cotton sold at JoAnns, Hobby Lobby, or WalMart.

I don't consider it to be an economy to use cheaper fabric if the resulting garment starts looking worn sooner or is just uncomfortable or unappealing to wear. Much of the mass market fabrics you find are cheaply printed on cheaply made base fabrics and don't

wear well at all. Even the expensive "linens" you can find there aren't good quality linen and it won't take too many washings to see it.

Online sources really are a blessing for fabrics. Etsy has a wide variety of delicious options. Looking for linen? There are a number of vendors, often out of Eastern Europe, who sell it in a rainbow of colors - usually much nicer stuff than you can get here at any price. It's worthwhile to order swatches if you can, though. Sometimes I'll order a couple of yards of white linen AND some swatches. I can always use the white linen for something, regardless of the weight. And then I don't feel like I've wasted the expense of shipping for the swatches, which most vendors will just tuck in with your purchase.

Look, too, for Japanese fabric vendors. Every country has its favored weaves. For whatever reason, cotton lawns and gauzes seem to be more popular in Japan. The choices are drool-worthy. And a few vendors even sell cotton georgette, which is just dreamy. Vintage types of fabrics like cotton dobby and dimity are also available from overseas vendors more readily than American ones, unfortunately.

While you CAN get fabric from time to time at thrift stores or vintage sales, I usually pass it by unless I spot something I can readily identify. It's too hard to figure out the fiber content and how to care for it. Synthetics have been with us for quite a long time. LOTS of 50's fabrics have some synthetic content.

I DO occasionally buy fabric on eBay. Not often, and usually only from a few select vendors that I am already familiar with. But it's worth a look, especially for specific things like dotted swiss or other vintage-styled fabrics.

Don't be afraid to haunt the clearance racks at fabric stores, which is especially useful when you're building a stash of fabric. That stash is most useful if it includes basics like solid colors cottons, linens, and wools. I usually even buy muslin by the bolt, especially if I have a 50% off coupon. It's useful for mocking up patterns, and for lining other fabrics.

Notions. You need notions, and there aren't a LOT of ways to get around that. But you CAN put some effort into spending less on them.

Elastic is usually cheaper by the yard than it is in prepackaged form. I'll often buy an extra yard, and stash it - labeled! Elastic is NOT something you want to source at thrift

of vintage shops. Just because the rubber in it ages and gets brittle. Stick with new, and don't keep it around too long.

Zippers are also something that usually needs to be purchased for the individual project. The varying colors and lengths makes it hard to buy in bulk unless you REALLY sew a lot, and in limited colors. Still, check online vendors, especially for sales, and buy a small quantity at a time if you find you use a lot of them. Remember that you CAN shorten regular nylon zippers simply by stitching around the teeth where you want it to stop until you have a nice, thick roll of stitches and cut off the excess.

Buttons are probably the easiest place to economize. And maybe some of this is because I feel like the variety of buttons available now is a pale shadow of the selection 30 years ago. Maybe that's my imagination. But, take a leaf from Grandma's book and start a button box.

Finish a project and have a couple of buttons left on the card? Put them in the button box. Getting rid of a shirt because of a stain or tear that can't be repaired? Cut off the buttons and put them in the button box. Feel the need to have an instant button box? Buy a jar of them at a vintage store or flea market and just start adding more. These days, when I'm starting a new project that needs buttons - I look in the button box first. Only if I can't find something appropriate do I buy any more.

Thread. I'm not a big proponent of economizing on thread. My sewing machine doesn't like Coates and Clark - I think it's the way the spools are wound. And vintage thread ages, becoming more prone to breakage with time.

Thread IS more economical on larger spools. So I tend to keep the great BIG spools of black, white, and navy thread around all the time. And, watch for sales. When "buy 2 get 1 free" pops up, get a few spools of colors that you use most commonly.

Ribbons, rick rack, and other embellishments are a place where you can decide whether you want to splurge or not. You can, however, make your own piping, bias trim, and ruffles. Replacing purchased trim with hand worked decorative elements can lend a high end look to something that wasn't that expensive to make. Embroidery is particularly useful for dressing things up. Add a motif to a pocket or placket. Or even scattered across the garment. I once made an Easter dress for my daughter that had 160 (I counted) bullion rosebuds scattered across the skirt. I laid out the arrangement

of them with a quilting ruler and a water soluble marking pen, and turned \$4/yd Imperial broadcloth into an embroidered fabric that would have cost \$30/yd to buy. It was tedious, but not difficult.

Hard notions like needles, pins, measuring tapes, and the like are all also things worth stocking up on when sales happen. Don't, however, economize by trying to use needles - whether machine or hand - for more than their useful life. About 8 hours of continuous use will do in either one. Less, if the fabric is hard on the needle. Don't be afraid to throw it out and get a new one. You'll suddenly find yourself struggling a lot less.

Which brings us to the point of the exercise. Sewing clothes is only partly about making something that is both higher quality and less expensive than mass-produced ready-to-wear clothing. You must also factor in the satisfaction you take in the making. If, for you, the process is part of your "entertainment," if you will, then that has a value, as well. Don't discount it.

DO make an effort to construct garments as solidly as you can. Finish the seams on the inside, hem securely, and back stitch where needed. All of that will help the things you make last longer.

One thing that you'll find is that any given sewing project will generate quite a lot of waste. Anything that has enough left to it to make use in another project should be saved - labeled if needed. It's possible to save extra fabric to patch or add to a garment later BUT - you almost have to plan ahead for this and wash the spare fabric each time you wash the garment - otherwise the new fabric will be distinctly different when the patch is applied.

Small amounts of fabric and notions shouldn't necessarily be immediately discarded, however. They do have some uses. Have kids? You can sometimes get small items for them out of the leftover fabric. Small summer baby bubbles that match Mom's dress are an easy additional project. You might have enough left over for a matching doll dress when making an outfit for your daughter. Or for a stuffed toy.

My sister and I used to sit on the edge of the room when Mom was cutting out a new project, waiting permission to make off with the scraps. We made small stuffed mice to play with. And then sometimes outfits FOR the mice. And when we got older and were allowed to use the sewing machine, doll clothes ourselves. It kept us occupied, we

practiced handsewing without objection - AND we had the results to play with.

Even if you don't have kids, scraps can be useful. If you ARE making something for quilting cotton, the scraps should go back into a scrap basket for quilt making. Don't like scrap quilts? There is almost certainly a quilt group near you with a member that DOES.

There are also hosts of small projects you can make with just a little bit of fabric. Pin cushions, needle books, buntings, hair accessories. Just use your imagination.

When you're making small items, you can look further afield for supplies. Feed your craft obsession, without breaking the bank. And it can be done beautifully. Fabs, the doll maker behind Fig and Me art dolls clothes her creations in outfits made from thrifted fabrics. I invite you to go check out her site and see what I mean. The most adorable little sweaters and jackets, made from wool or cashmere fine gauge thrift shop finds. Hats and capes from cast off blazers. And sometimes she even makes whole doll bodies from felted sweaters, adding ears and tails.

Men's shirts can also be repurposed. There are vintage leaflets going back to WWII that have instructions for turning them into everything from an apron to a child's dress.

High quality menswear can sometimes even yield enough wool fabric of a quality no longer available in fabric stores for a child's outfit. My mother once cannibalized one of Dad's old wool Navy uniforms to make a set of overalls for my sister when she was about 5 years old.

Are you a knitter? You CAN shop for secondhand sweaters and unravel them for the yarn. This takes a certain degree of patience, and proper selection of a sweater that CAN be unraveled. I'll drop a link in the show notes with some instructions.

Why would you want to? Some people just enjoy the challenge of it. But in some cases, you can find a sweater made from a yarn that would be prohibitively expensive, otherwise. Like what? Cashmere, for starters. A \$5 cashmere sweater will yield enough yarn to make a deliciously soft hat, gloves, and maybe even a scarf.

All of these strategies involve using your wits and skills to make things that continue to be of good quality without paying through the nose for them.

Whereas, buying things as cheaply as you can get them, just because they are cheap, is the opposite of that. Now, I will avail myself of inexpensive things when I don't need them to last or I'm not concerned with the quality.

But, when it comes the things I make, I don't like to expend effort on poor materials. This is for a number of reasons. First, I will (and have) flatly confessed that I am a bit of a snob about tools and materials. I LIKE to work with quality stuff, and I like to use well-made tools. But it's not just a matter of feeling that things are better because the cost more.

It is demonstrably more difficult, for instance, to learn to knit with Red Heart acrylic yarn on aluminum craft store needles than it is with pure wool yarn on smooth bamboo. Poor quality materials, and cheap tools make MAKING less enjoyable and more frustrating. Sometimes to the point of sucking all the joy out of it entirely. I feel the same way about trying to navigate a complicated quilt pattern with cheap, Walmart fabric.

Sometimes it comes down to what your goals are, as well. If you just want to throw together some very cheap, very simple things you can do that. My goals are to provide my family with things that don't wear out in a couple of wearings, while still being comfortable and attractive to wear. And I'm willing to expend some extra time to make that happen. Hence, that Easter dress for my daughter. If you're familiar with heirloom sewing, you know that it's very easy to drop a couple of hundred dollars on materials for a child's dress. Instead, I spent about \$15 in fabric, and another 3 or 4 for embroidery floss and buttons - and got an equally lovely garment out of it that was, at the same time, likely to hold up for multiple wearings. And did get passed down to her little sister, later. What I'm NOT doing is trying to find ways to make things so cheaply that I can sell them to make a profit. At which point, all that extra time is going to end up in the "loss" column.

Still, now is a good time to learn some skills to help you economize your crafting habits. Expanding your skills to make use of a greater pool of patterns (or no patterns at all), as well as other sources of supplies, will let you keep your fingers busy, keep your family and house in fashion and comfort, AND not break the bank.

For now, it's still much less expensive to buy socks than to knit them out of wool, and darn them as the wear. But maybe THAT'S not a bad skill to practice, either!

I hope you've enjoyed this episode of Vintage Americana, and that if you did you'll give me a rating or review. Or, maybe screenshot it and share it to social media! Don't forget to stop by the blog at [brambleberry meadow.com](http://brambleberry meadow.com) for more, and sign up for the email list, as well.

For the moment, I am going to go downstairs and work on some little embroidered bookmarks out of scraps of fabric left over from another project.

Are you coming?