

METHODS TO MASTER:

Sewing with Plaid

PART ONE

{ by Amy Alan }

The history of plaid is as rich as the colors incorporated into the perennially fashionable fabric. Learn how to identify a variety of plaid types so you can sew and match plaid fabrics like a pro.

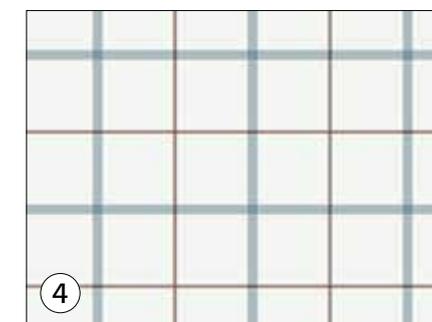
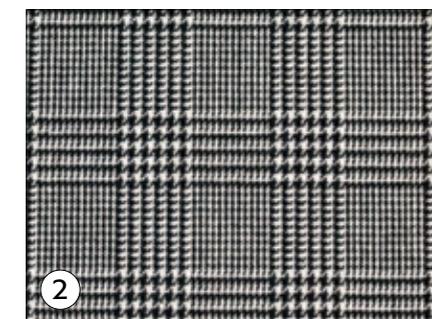
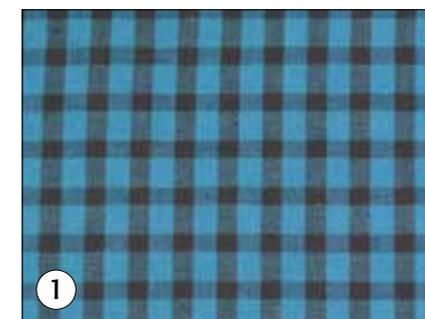


Watch Amy demonstrate techniques for cutting and sewing plaid in "Mad for Plaid," episode 602 of *Sew it All!* Visit sewitaltv.com or sew.tv for more information.

Plaid 101

The word "plaid" encompasses many different fabric patterns. In North America, it's a fabric consisting of any arrangement of colored warp yarns (yarns that run lengthwise) woven with weft yarns (yarns that run selvage to selvage, or crosswise) in the same order as the warp threads are drawn in. However, many modern plaid patterns are printed on the fabric surface rather than woven, which opens the door for more design possibilities.

The journey of plaid as we know it began as a simple shepherd's check, with samples of woven check fabrics that date back thousands of years. A check is one of the easiest fabrics to weave, as its pattern consists of the same repeat of colors running both crosswise and lengthwise. The colors meet at right angles to form squares. One of the most basic and familiar check fabrics is gingham, which features a plain-weave basic check (1). Houndstooth is check fabric created using a twill weave (2). Windowpane is another simple plaid check, in which one colored bar on a solid background is evenly spaced on both the warp and weft. It's one of the easiest plaids to match and is often used for men's dress shirts (3). Tattersal plaid closely re-



sembles windowpane, but is composed of two colors worked evenly on a solid color background (4).

Scottish Roots

In Scotland, the word "plaid" refers to more than just the fabric weave. Both now and hundreds of years ago, a Scottish plaid is a long rectangle of cloth that's two or more yards wide and seven to 15 yards long, depending on the woven pattern, pleating and

occasion on which it will be worn. The early plaid was the forerunner of the modern kilt and could be draped over the body, belted around the waist or used as a blanket. It was worn over a long shirt while the legs were left bare. Nowadays, plaids are often seen draped over the shoulder as part of a traditional Scottish costume. Writings from as early as 1538 state that the Scottish Highland clans had specific plaids woven in unique stripes and

colors. One could determine where a man was from based on the view of his plaid (then spelled “plad”). These plaids designs were woven with yarns following very specific sequences of colors, creating a distinctive tartan (5).

Tartan is one of the most highly esteemed plaid varieties. It’s created with a twill weave, and each specific pattern represents a different Scottish clan. Tartan also has a deep and important history. The Scottish wore tartan to show patriotism and to revolt against the British army, resulting in tartan being banned by law in 1746. That law was later repealed in 1782.

Harlequin plaid, or argyle, is often combined with tartan patterns. Argyle first appeared on long lightweight socks called “tartan hose” and often duplicated the tartan colors, although the pattern was slightly altered in size. This diamond-shaped plaid continues as a popular pattern on knit socks and sweaters, but can also be found on printed fabric and merchandise (6).

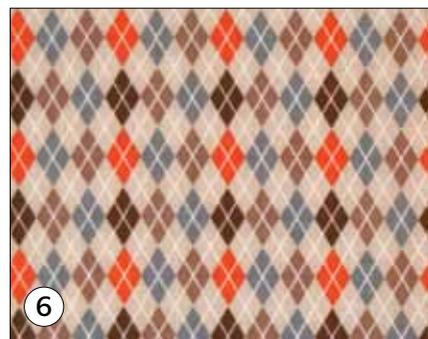
When King George IV visited Scotland in 1822, he dressed in bright red tartan, giving the fabric instant worldwide status. Tartan continued to grow in popularity with Queen Victoria’s liberal use of the pattern throughout Balmoral Castle. Checked patterns began appearing on all manner of clothing and home goods in the 1850s (7). The widespread use of the word “plaid” as a catchall term referring



to any differently striped fabric likely began around this time. Plaid became a ubiquitous pattern printed on everything from jewelry and luggage to plates and tins. Everyone was so excited about the plaid shawls, sashes and fabric varieties being produced that it became acceptable to use the word outside of Scotland to describe almost all striped and checked fabrics.

Past to Present

Following its rise during the Victorian age, plaid began appearing in all aspects of a person’s daily life. Men wore it in the form of full plaid suits, golf attire



and swim trunks. Women wore plaid as well, and also dressed their children in it. Homes featured entire rooms decked out in plaid, and every holiday season brought out a sea of red, green and gold tartans. Plaid was here to stay.

Another plaid fabric that became popular during the 19th century was madras. Madras is a lightweight plaid fabric that’s usually worn in the summertime (8). True madras fabrics are handmade in India using vegetable dyes that bleed when washed, so the fabric is commonly referred to as “bleeding madras.” When plaid came into style in the 1800s, weavers who

made madras began to showcase popular plaid and patchwork patterns, often copying Scottish tartans. In the ’60s, madras found its way into American fashion as the new preppy fabric everyone had to have. Most modern madras fabrics are made with colorfast dyes, but true devotees still seek out the bleeding madras.

Thanks to fashion designers, such as Ralph Lauren, Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen, plaid continues to play an important part in fashion and home décor. What else defines design house Burberry but their trademark plaid fabric? Plaid patterns are woven with cashmere, flannel, silk, and every variety of cotton and wool available. It’s also printed onto quilting cotton, and is highly popular on furniture, stationary and handbags as well. Celebrities wear plaid and costume designers embrace it for movies.

Balancing Act

If you find a plaid fabric to use for a sewing project, examine the stripes in the plaid pattern. There are countless woven and printed plaid pattern variations, so identifying the plaid repeat as either “balanced” or “unbalanced” helps you picture how you’ll need to cut out and match the plaid. This also helps you estimate how much extra fabric you’ll need to account for matching the colored stripes.

HELPFUL TERMS

Make note of the following terms to help identify plaid types.

- **Dominant line:** the strongest color bar featured in the fabric
- **Repeat:** the plaid pattern sequence from one dominant line to the next
- **Check:** a pattern with the same repeat of colors running crosswise and lengthwise, forming squares, such as gingham
- **Crosswise:** the direction of the weft threads running selvage to selvage
- **Lengthwise:** the direction of the warp threads running parallel to the selvage

A plaid may be balanced and even, or unbalanced and uneven lengthwise, crosswise, or both directions. Learn how to quickly discern the plaid pattern type you’re working with to determine the best way to cut and sew the project.

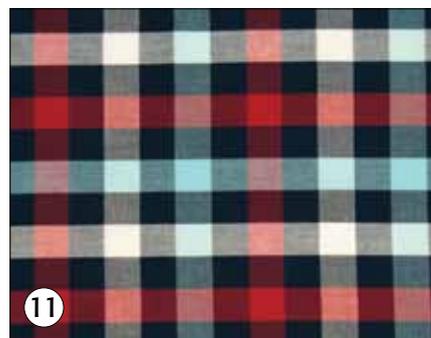
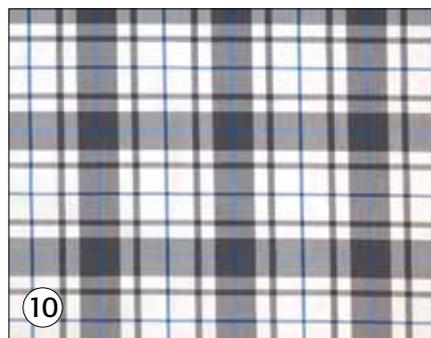
Squint at the fabric to find a dominant line. The dominant line is the strongest color bar featured in the fabric. In order to see what color is most prominent, it may help to take a photo of the fabric or stand several feet away from it. If no one color appears dominant, consider which color in the plaid you’d like featured in your project. The color that you place along the center front of a garment will be the most noticeable color.

Lay the fabric in a single layer on a large flat work surface. Note any differences in colored stripes, shading, or if the design is composed of either



squares or rectangles. Note if your fabric has a right and wrong side, or if both sides can be used the garment right side. Printed fabrics aren’t reversible and some woven fabrics have textured finishes on only one fabric side. If you want the finished garment or project to have the visual effect that the plaid is mirrored to either side of the center front, don’t use an unbalanced one-sided plaid fabric (9).

Note whether the plaid pattern repeat is balanced or unbalanced.



To correctly identify the plaid repeat, it's helpful to have at least one yard or more to examine. Balanced plaids have the same position of colors and threads in both lengthwise and crosswise directions. If the area of the repeat is perfectly square, it's likely an even plaid (10). The pattern reverses on all sides of the plaid's dominant color bar. If the repeat is a rectangle, it's uneven and unbalanced. In unbalanced plaids, the colors and threads are woven or printed unevenly in the lengthwise or crosswise direction, and sometimes both (11).

Fold the fabric lengthwise along one color stripe center and fold back the upper fabric layer crosswise end. If the crosswise lines are identical on the fabric underneath and the fold, the plaid is balanced in that direction (12).

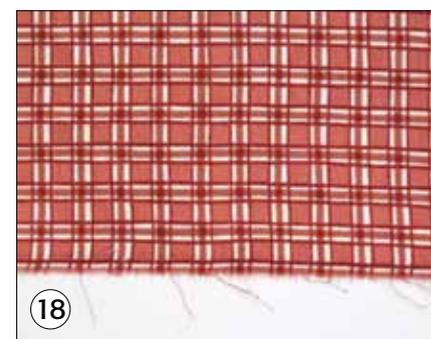
Fold the fabric crosswise, and then check if the pattern lines and colors align lengthwise. If the pattern reverses on all sides of the main color bar, it's likely a balanced plaid (13). Balanced plaids are the easiest to cut and sew.

Fold the fabric in half again and fold back the upper layer of fabric on the diagonal. Look carefully at each colored stripe in both the crosswise and lengthwise directions. Do the lines and colors match along the diagonal line? If so, it's an even and balanced plaid, so the fabric can be cut with the pattern pieces flipped in either direction. The same lines will appear on the left and right and above and below the dominate line (14).

Keep a careful eye for plaids that are evenly spaced, but with colors that

don't repeat or mirror exactly on the opposite side of a dominant color bar. A plaid can be evenly spaced and still have colors that don't repeat. If the lines, spaces and colors in both the lengthwise and crosswise directions don't match when either are folded on the bias, the plaid is uneven and therefore unbalanced.

If the plaid balances crosswise, but not lengthwise, or if it balances lengthwise, but not crosswise, it's unbalanced. To be more precise, it's a one-way, one-directional plaid. Look for different thicknesses of yarn, different colors or shading, or for thicker or thinner stripes on either side of the main focal point. If a plaid isn't balanced crosswise, it has a right and left direction (15). If it's not balanced lengthwise, it has an up and down



direction (16). This is very important to remember during cutting to ensure all pattern pieces are facing the same direction.

If the plaid is unbalanced and one-directional both lengthwise and crosswise, then it's a two-way, one-directional plaid (17). This plaid type is often composed of many yarn colors and is the most difficult to cut and match.

When examining the fabric, check that the fabric weave is on-grain, and not stretched or distorted by more than 1/4". The plaid should have true right angles. If it doesn't, it will be very difficult to correctly match up the lines during sewing. Always check fabric carefully before you buy it. If it's distorted, you'll encounter many problems during cutting and construction.

If the plaid pattern is printed rather than woven, carefully tear the fabric along the crosswise grain to determine if the print is aligned (18). Does the print correctly match the fabric grain? If not and you cut your fabric on grain, the plaid will be skewed.

For some modern novelty plaid variations, it's very difficult to match plaids while sewing, so consider dominant lines, rather than worrying about matching every single stripe and thread as you would for a tartan. Interpretations of plaid on many printed fashion and quilting fabrics incorporate a variety of colors, wavy lines, dots, flowers and swirls (19). These variations can be easier to work with than balanced plaids, because the design lines are usually more forgiving. ➤

RESOURCE
The Children 1880-1920, Plate 036 and Woman 1849, Plate 030 fashion plates are from the Costume Institute Fashion Plates collection: metmuseum.org.

To learn more tips and tricks for cutting, matching and sewing plaids, stay tuned for "Methods to Master: Sewing with Plaid Part 2" in the Dec/Jan Sew News!