

Surviving Fabric Selections

Shopping for fabric is fun while shopping for a specific fabric for a quilt design can be difficult, especially when it is a mystery quilt.

I don't know how many quilts I have designated for give-it-away-quick pile in the last ten years. I'm sure it's in the dozens. Each time I swear I am going to do better at fabric selection. Each time I approach the task with trepidation.

I boost up my self-confidence and go to the fabric store. As I walk in the sight and sound of fabric assails me. Oh, yes, fabric has a sound. The thump of bolts being pulled for selection hitting the bottom of the cart, the rustling of it as it is laid out on the counter, the crunch of yardage being cut, and of course the cries of outrage from fabric not selected.

I make several color choices, fold them together so I can see them all playing together. I put them away in their new home (a clear plastic bag or box) and watch them carefully for fights. Is one dominating over the other? Do they play nicely? Is one picking a fight with another?

After several days of watching them carefully and swapping out the malcontents, I begin cutting the fabric to specifications, feeling confident in my choices. I begin sewing the pieces together and laying out the blocks to view. As the quilt begins to take form on the board I realize to my horror that I have made a huge mistake. The fabric sprinkled liberally throughout the quilt that played so nicely with the other fabrics when it was a big piece, could no longer defend itself against its more dominant playmates. Another quilt for the give-it-away-quick pile has just been created.

Then it hit me as I was paper-piecing a project. Why not create a block designed for testing the compatibility of color choices? So that is what I did. I designed a paper pieced block called Iowa's Windmills. This block can be used to test the compatibility of three, four and five color choices.

Now, I purchase 1/8th of a yard of the fabrics I think will work. I paper piece the block in just minutes. Then, I pin it up on my bulletin board and look at it often. Usually within minutes or hours I can tell if the colors will play nicely. If not, it only takes a few minutes to create another test block.

Sometimes when I have a number of choices, I will create a block for each color choice. With each block I create I write on the paper pattern the name of the pattern and the fabric, where and when I purchased it. When the quilt is complete I either use the block for accent on the label or I add it to my reference pile.

Sadly my pile of give-it-away-quick quilts has dwindled to a precious few. They will be going to my favorite charity soon.