

TEN TOP TIPS
for
**SUCCESSFUL
FREE MACHINE
EMBROIDERY**

Deborah Wirsu



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10 Top Tips for Successful Free Machine Embroidery

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Introduction

Regardless of whether you choose to call this technique Free Machine Embroidery, Thread Sketching, Thread Painting, freestyle stitching, or any other name, the bottom line is that the method allows you to be as creative as you like.

And **being creative is what we're all about!**

When you use your sewing machine like a pencil to draw with thread, you are entering a wondrous world where almost any effect is possible.

Be open to '*going with the flow*' — letting your stitching follow its own path.

In this way you'll achieve wonderful — and *interesting* — results!



At **Thread Sketching in Action**, my goal has always been to help creative people (Yes, *you!*), embrace their creativity so that your work is uniquely '*yours*'.

It is so much more fun to tread your own path and find a style that you can love and embrace.

Sure, you might need some guidance along the way (*that's where I can help*), and with just a little time and practice, you'll be creating fibre art you can be truly proud of!

In this free eBook ***10 Top Tips for Successful Free Machine Embroidery***, you'll start off right and get some great ideas for injecting a little (or a lot!) of your own personality into your thread sketching, thread painting, and free machine embroidery projects.

So, let's get on with my ***10 Top Tips for Successful Free Machine Embroidery!***

1. Set up your machine for free machine embroidery

We all know that preparation is key to the success of just about anything we do in life.

And free motion stitching, whether it be thread sketching, thread painting, free machine embroidery or traditional free motion quilting is no different.



Set up your machine correctly from the start and your machine embroidering experience will be trouble-free!

Your sewing machine

Most domestic sewing machines are capable of free motion stitching! Even if you're on a budget, there is no need to feel left out of this wonderful technique.

Just make sure your machine is capable of having the feed dogs lowered, and a free motion foot fitted (I'll explain more about the free motion foot shortly).

The feed dogs

The **feed dogs** are the little 'teeth' underneath the needle. When they are disengaged (using a switch or electronic touchpad) they will no longer move up and down as you stitch. This allows you to then move the fabric in any direction you like.

The free motion foot

One essential item for doing free machine embroidery is the **free motion foot**.

Not all machines come with this as an included part, so you may need to contact your sewing machine supplier to get one. They are easy to source online, too.

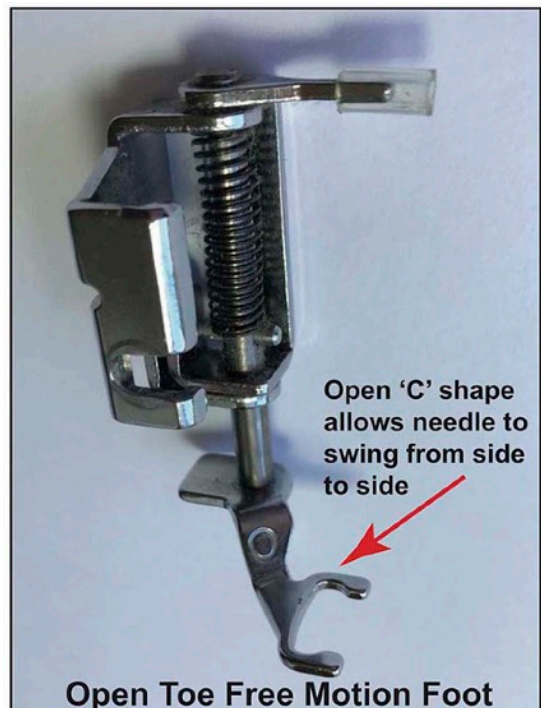
Fitting a free motion foot to your machine and dropping the feed dogs allows *you* to take control of stitch direction and how fast or slow the fabric moves under the needle.

Most of us are taught to sew in straight lines and it can be hard to break this habit.

Once to get the feel of taking control and moving sideways, up, down, angles, circles, squares, squiggles, as well as more formal free motion designs, a whole new world of possibilities open up! All it takes is a little practice.

There are many types of **free motion foot**. In my opinion, the easiest one to start with is the 'C' foot or 'Open toe' hopping foot.

Read more about the free motion foot [here](#).



When using the free motion foot, remember to lower the feed dogs and alter the **stitch length setting** on your machine to zero, or as close to zero as it will go.

[Note: Altering the stitch length is not always necessary. However, if you're a beginner I highly recommend doing this.]

TOP TIP!

If you are a newcomer to free motion stitching, head over to my video tutorial at [How to set up your machine for free motion stitching](#).



Choose the right needle

Choosing the best needle for the job can make a huge difference to your results. To some extent, it's a matter of trial and error, to see what suits you best, but keep in mind that there is a vast range of specialty needles available, each with a specific purpose.

My favourite for free machine embroidery and thread sketching is a **Machine Embroidery needle**. Occasionally I will use a **Top-stitch needle, Quilting needle, or Metallic thread needle** — with the decision determined by the nature of the work I'm doing.

Which brand?

Needles are something of a personal preference., Also, what suits someone else's machine may not suit yours. However, it's important to buy good quality needles. Anything else will lead to frustration!



My favourite brand of needle is **Schmetz** – great quality that won't let you down.

The **needle size** you choose will vary according to what you are working on. Once again, your sewing machine manual should offer some guidelines about needles.

For most free motion work I find that needles ranging from **75/11 to 90/14** are the most appropriate.

Is your needle up to the task?

Always make sure the needle is **sharp**.

Thread sketching can dull the point of a needle very quickly, so always make sure you have a supply on hand. A 'dull' needle can quickly lead to tension problems and fraying thread.

2. Fabric choice makes a difference



Choosing fabric

We all know that the fabric we choose greatly influences not only the appearance of our work, but also how easy (or not!) the stitching process is.

- ◆ For **simplicity** and **ease of use**, opt for 100% cotton fabric.
- ◆ Are you seeking **elegance**? If so, then silk or shantung will add some glamor to your work.
- ◆ For **texture**, try fabrics like burlap, velvet, corduroy, or faux fur.

But what is the **best (a.k.a. the easiest)** fabric to use for free machine embroidery?

100% cotton is the easiest to work with.

There are many '**weights**' of cotton fabric appropriate for free machine embroidery. Once again, your choice will likely be determined by what you want to use your project for when complete. Often, ordinary, sturdy quilter's cotton is the perfect choice. At other times, you may like to use something lighter.

Thread count

Regardless of weight, try to choose fabric with a **high thread count**.

I recommend a thread count of *at least* 200. This means that the fabric has quite a tight weave — the looser the weave, the less stable the fabric will be, and the more liable to puckering or distortion.

In both cases, you are likely to need to employ either a firm stabiliser or an embroidery hoop to prevent pull-up.

And don't be afraid to use gorgeous fabrics, such as silk. If correctly stabilised, silk is also easy to stitch.



3. Thread: Choose wisely!



Just as your choice of fabric influences the look of your piece, so does your choice of thread.

While it's possible to use *almost* any type of thread for free machine embroidery, investing in good-quality thread will result in consistent and fabulous results.

- ◆ **Heavy gauge threads** will fill areas faster and create more texture, while finer gauge threads are wonderful for areas that need dense shading or blending of colors.
- ◆ **Shiny or glossy threads** are wonderful for thread sketching. But perhaps you don't want that glossy look? If so, choose a matte cotton thread.
- ◆ **Variegated threads** come in a huge range of colors. Wonderful effects can be achieved.
- ◆ **Metallic threads** add exciting highlights, but can be challenging to use — be sure to practice on another quilt sandwich first.

Thread Weight

When doing free machine embroidery, the most convenient thread weight to use is 40-gauge machine embroidery thread.

However, if your work is going to be very delicate, fine, or densely stitched, you may prefer to try a finer thread.

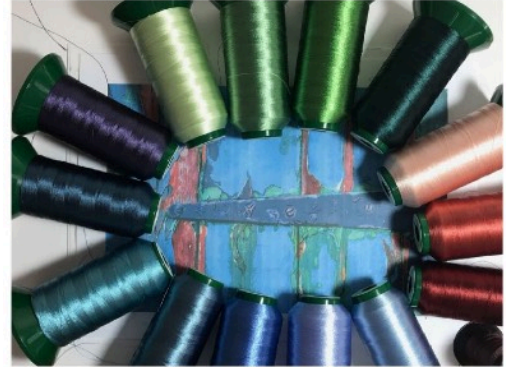
TOP TIP!

For a detailed review of machine embroidery threads, read my article: [Best Machine Embroidery Thread for Free Motion Stitching.](#)

Best machine embroidery thread for free motion stitching



Your complete guide to choosing the perfect thread



Deborah Wirsu

www.ThreadSketchingInAction.com



4. Stabilise!

If you want your free machine embroidery or thread painting to be trouble-free and look stunning, then ensure that the surface you are stitching on is stabilised before you begin.

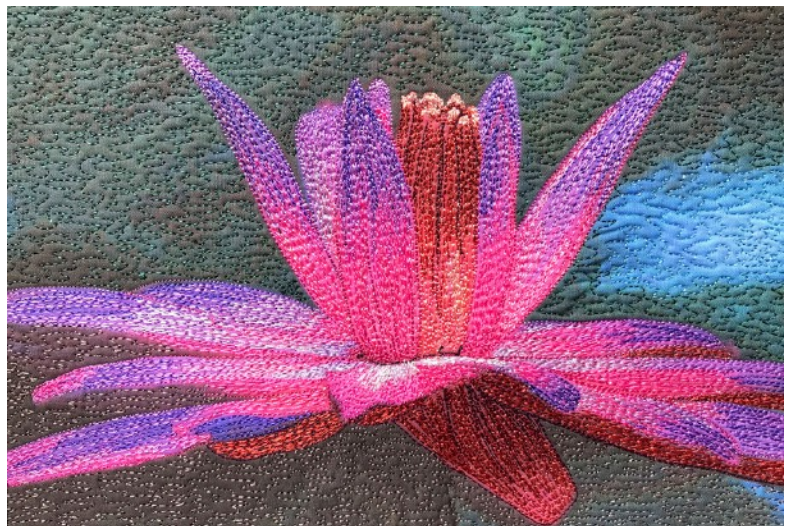
Starting out with the right stabiliser will help you avoid problems as you stitch. But with so much choice, selecting the best stabiliser can seem overwhelming.

So, how do you choose?

Fear not! Although there are stabilisers to suit every type of project, once you have found two or three methods that work for you, there will be no need to fret about it any longer!

Begin by giving some thought to how you intend using your completed project.

- ◆ Is it a stand-alone picture, or an embroidered or thread painted picture on a larger quilt?
- ◆ Is your design serving as an embellishment on a larger work, or an entire picture in itself?
- ◆ Do you intend using batting as well?
- ◆ Do you want to use an embroidery hoop?



The answer to these questions determines the type of stabiliser you will need to use.

Stabilisers vary from very light and filmy tear-away or cut-away stabilisers, to soluble stabilisers that wash away in water, to very heavy and stiff stabilisers that will secure even the densest of stitching.

And they are also available in fusible and non-fusible varieties, as well!

Of course, you always have the option of using a hoop, if you prefer to work that way.

Brief guide to choosing and using stabilisers

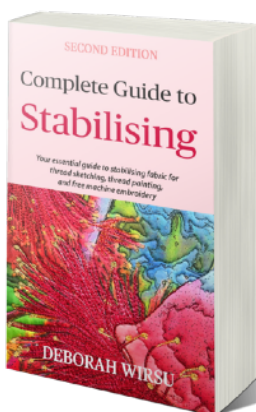
- ◆ **Outline designs and light thread sketching:** Use a light to medium tear-away or leave-in stabiliser.
- ◆ **Hooped designs:** Light tear-away or leave-in stabiliser, or no stabiliser at all.
- ◆ **Thread sketching an art quilt:** May *not* need stabiliser, if you're using a standard 3-layer 'quilt sandwich'. Alternatively, use a light-medium weight stabiliser for support.
- ◆ **Solid filler stitch and thread painting:** You need a tough stabiliser! Use a heavy, firm stabiliser.
- ◆ **Light, lacy, or filigree designs:** There are several options here — light, tear-away, or leave-in stabiliser; soluble stabiliser, or an embroidery hoop.

Secure your layers

Press and smooth out all your layers, so that there are no lumps or wrinkles (unless you want these included as a design feature!).

Pin, baste or fuse the layers securely so they don't shift as you work. Taking the time to secure the sandwich will save you much frustration later.

When using a hoop, make sure the fabric is taut in the hoop, and not distorted or bubbling.



TOP TIP!

Learn everything you need to know about stabilising for thread sketching, thread painting, and free machine embroidery in this handy guide:

Complete Guide to Stabilising [2nd Edition]

(New edition! Completely revised and updated)

5. Draw, paint, or print your image

If the thought of ‘drawing’ freehand with your sewing machine fills you with terror, you are not alone!

The **good news** is that you don’t have to work that way.

When working a free machine embroidery design, many people mark the intended design on the fabric before they begin.



For some, this may be a lightly-sketched guide, while others may elect to print or trace their design onto the fabric.

If you elect to go down the painting or printing paths, then you will need either fabric paints or a home/office printer in order to get your design onto the fabric.

But most often, you will find yourself using a **quilt marking pen** of some sort. Once again, there are many to choose from, ranging from a simple pencil (difficult to remove) to heat-erasable markers (iron away with ease).

You need to be careful when choosing any fabric marking pen, as some don’t live up to the promises on the pack. Although some say they will completely ‘*air erase*’ or ‘*wash out*’, this is not always the case, so be sure to test your marker on a piece of scrap fabric first.

Probably the safest product to use, in regard to ease of removal, are **chalk quilt markers**, as the chalk will brush off or wash out, or **Pilot FriXion Erasable Markers**.

My preference (in most situations where I need to use a marker) is the Pilot FriXion Erasable Pen. However, even with these, care should be taken.



Keep in mind that these pens were *not specifically designed* to be used on fabric, yet thousands of quilters and embroiderers the world over have found them perfect for many of their needs.

Once you have drawn your design on the fabric, simply pressing it with a warm iron will erase the markings!

Nevertheless, I urge you to do a test run first. I have occasionally found that a very faint line is still visible on some fabrics, even after pressing and ‘removing’ the lines.

6. Check your tension

Everyone encounters problems with tension at some time in their stitching 'career'.

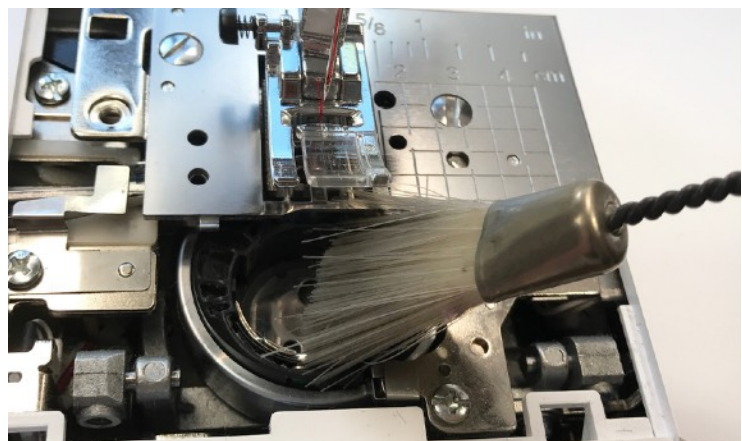
The key to understanding tension and getting it right lies in understanding what can cause tension problems, as well as how different weights of fabric or number of layers affect your stitching.

Nevertheless, if your machine is well maintained and calibrated to factory settings, you should rarely experience any problems with tension.

Occasionally, when using different weight thread in the top and bobbin of the machine, small adjustments may be necessary to achieve even stitching on both sides of your work. As with all things, test it first!

If tension issues do arise, then there are some things to check before altering either the upper thread tension or the bobbin tension:

- ◆ **Are you using the same thread (or the same weight of thread) in the top and bobbin?** If your machine is correctly maintained, problems should be rare.
- ◆ **If using different weight thread in the top and bobbin**, then make sure both are good quality thread. Do a test-run first and make *small* adjustments to the upper thread tension until you're satisfied.
- ◆ **Check that your needle is in good condition.** A nicked or dull needle can play havoc with your tension.
- ◆ **Do you have a build-up of fluff or lint in the bobbin case?** It's amazing how a bit of lint will result in broken thread or poor tension. Remove the stitching plate and use a small brush to clean out the entire bobbin case area. Magically, problems often disappear after taking this simple action.

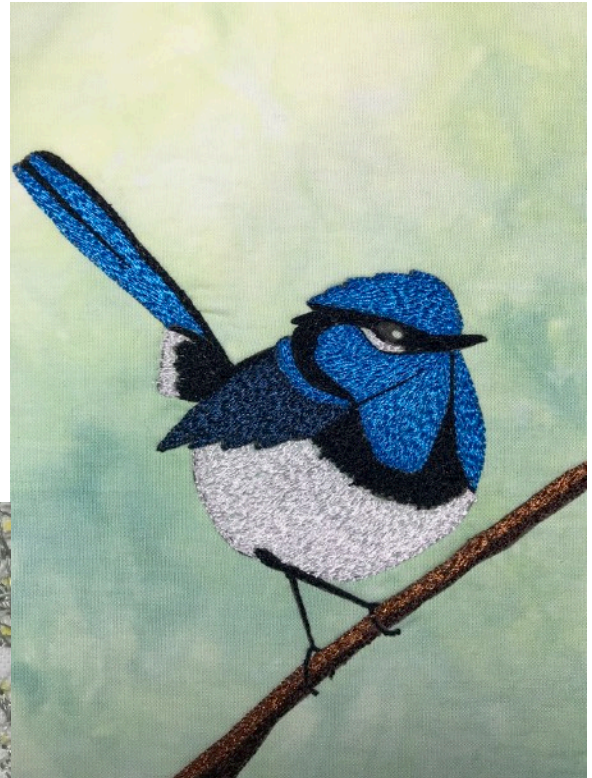


7. Choose an appropriate stitch

As a free machine embroiderer, there are two basic (but essential) stitches for your work, these being **free motion straight stitch** and **free motion zigzag stitch**.

Depending on your preferred style and project type, you will find yourself using both of these stitches.

This little free machine embroidered design of a *Superb Blue Wren* is worked entirely in free motion straight stitch.



On the other hand, the *Red Berries* are worked entirely in free motion zigzag stitch.

It's easy to see the different effect each of these stitches produces.

8. Stitch direction and regularity

Now, I know how easy it is to get frustrated trying to keep your stitching even. And there are certainly times when this is essential.

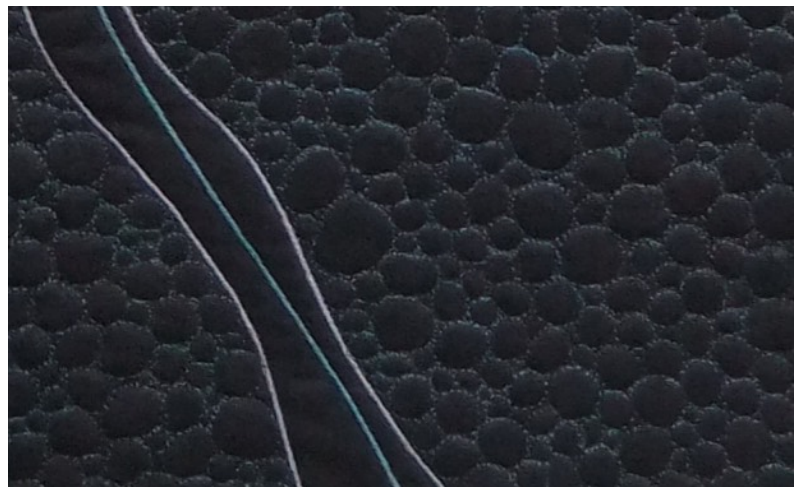
But keep in mind that, often, the length of your stitches really doesn't matter very much, as long as you are achieving the effect you want.

Stop worrying about whether your stitches are too long or too short. There is a way to use every kind of stitch. And, of course, your stitching will improve with practice.

When starting out it can take a while to learn to coordinate your feet and your hands. The natural inclination when learning is to stitch more slowly if you find the stitch length is irregular, but this is often the wrong thing to do!

The trick is to **speed up the machine** (pressure on the foot pedal) – *just a little* – and **slow down your hand movement**.

By doing this, you'll avoid skipped stitches (which tend to happen when stitching too slowly), poor tension (ditto).



The result will be more even curves, avoiding some of those 'angular' circles that can so easily occur, and a more regular stitch length.

Some people like to use a stitch regulator for free machine embroidery. Sure, they can be handy if you're working more formal free motion quilting designs, but for creative thread sketching, irregular stitching adds interest and texture and can be made into a feature of your work. Personally, I've never found stitch regulators helpful.

Multi-directional free motion zigzag stitch for thread painting

Did you know that wonderful effects can be achieved by stitching in random directions? There is no need to keep all your stitching aligned in neat rows.

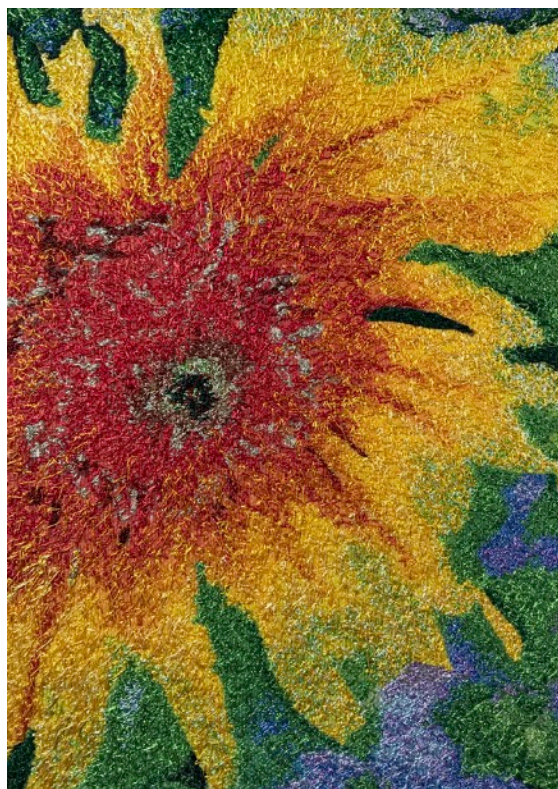
Multi-directional free motion zigzag stitch opens up an entire new world of possibilities!



With free motion zigzag stitching, you can use the different stitch directions to create texture, realism and depth in your work.

Think about whether you want to create a photo-realistic portrait, or a more Impressionist-style thread painting.

- ◆ Use short and long stitches.
- ◆ Change the direction.
- ◆ Change the colour.
- ◆ Layer and mix colours, just as you would when working with paint.
- ◆ Vary the size of your stitches, too. Different sizes lead to different results.
- ◆ For added interest, explore the possibilities of multi-directional stitching using the straight stitch setting.
- ◆ Experiment!
- ◆ Break the rules! [*What rules?* 😊]



9. Are you puckering up?

There is nothing more frustrating than preparing a beautiful background or surface on which to stitch, only to find that, as you stitch, the fabric draws up, puckers, bends, bubbles and buckles and leaves you with an ugly, lumpy and uneven surface.

So how can you avoid puckering?

- **Before you begin, check that your work is thoroughly stabilised** Unless you're working on a single layer quilt top or very delicate fabric and design, err on the side of a more substantial stabiliser.
- **Select base fabrics that have a high thread count.** High thread count fabric provides an easier surface on which to work, and will 'pull up' less than lighter or sheer fabrics.
- **Are you aiming to do a lot of dense thread painting or embroidery?** If so, then use a finer thread, e.g. 40-, 50- or 60-gauge (and don't forget to check that stabiliser!).

TOP TIP!

Learn all the 'ins-and-outs' of thread sketching and stabilising...

- ◆ Creative Thread Sketching: a beginner's guide [2nd Edition]
- ◆ *Completely revised, updated and expanded!*



10. The 3 P's: Practice, Practice, Practice!

Go easy on yourself! If you've never done any free machine embroidery, thread sketching, or thread painting before then it's likely that your first attempts will be *'interesting'*!

- ◆ Learn to laugh.
- ◆ Learn from what goes 'right' and what doesn't!
- ◆ Keep practising.

Learning any new skill or technique can take a little time, so remain patient. Have some spare quilt sandwiches or stabilised fabric nearby for practicing.

Test out your ideas, designs and styles. Try different fabrics and threads. Get used to stitching with a freestyle, relaxed hand motion.

Think about how you could turn anything you consider *'less than perfect'* into a great piece of art.

Yes, it can be done!

How, I hear you ask?

Well—one of my favourite methods is simply to stitch over it all again! Add more colour, or even more fabric. Create layers. And stitch it again.

Obviously, there comes a time when enough is enough, and I have my fair share of abandoned work!

But every time you sit down at your machine to try just one more thing, you'll get a little more comfortable. It's like learning to drive a car, or play the piano, or dance the tango. It all takes practice!



Don't Wait – Get Started Today!

- ◆ Beginner or advanced — today is the day to do some free machine embroidery, thread sketching or thread painting.
- ◆ Find your natural style and preferences.
- ◆ The more you practice, the more fun you'll have, and the easier it becomes.

Take a Class With Me...

Join in with one of my self-paced online classes and take your thread sketching or art quilting to the next level!



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