

Beautiful Blooms

*Quilts and
Cushions
to Appliqué*

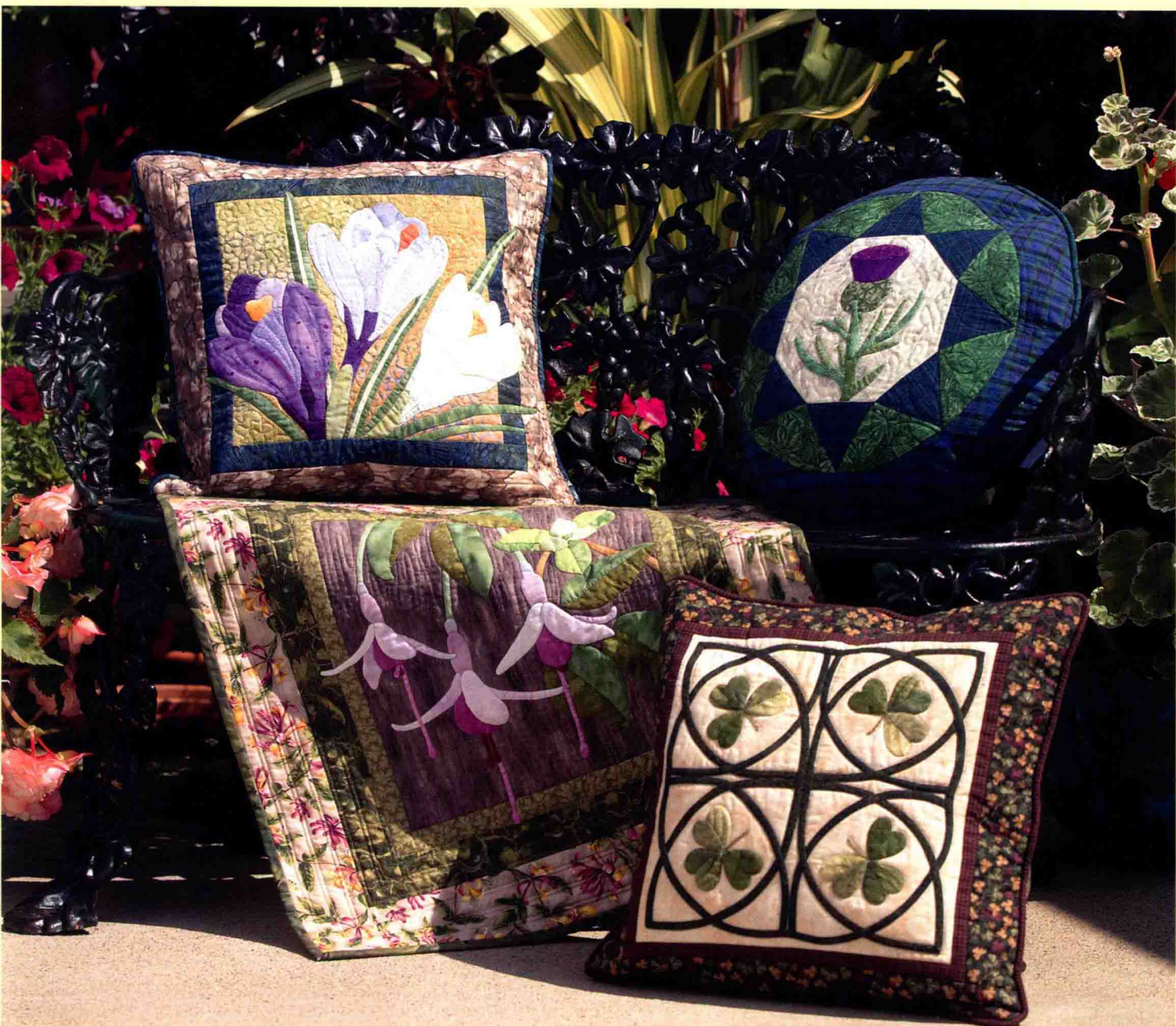


Susan Taylor Propst

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Martingale[®]
& C O M P A N Y



Photos on pages 2 and 3
by Jonathan Propst

Beautiful Blooms:
Quilts and Cushions to Appliqué
© 2008 by Susan Taylor Propst

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Mission Statement

Dedicated to providing quality products
and service to inspire creativity.



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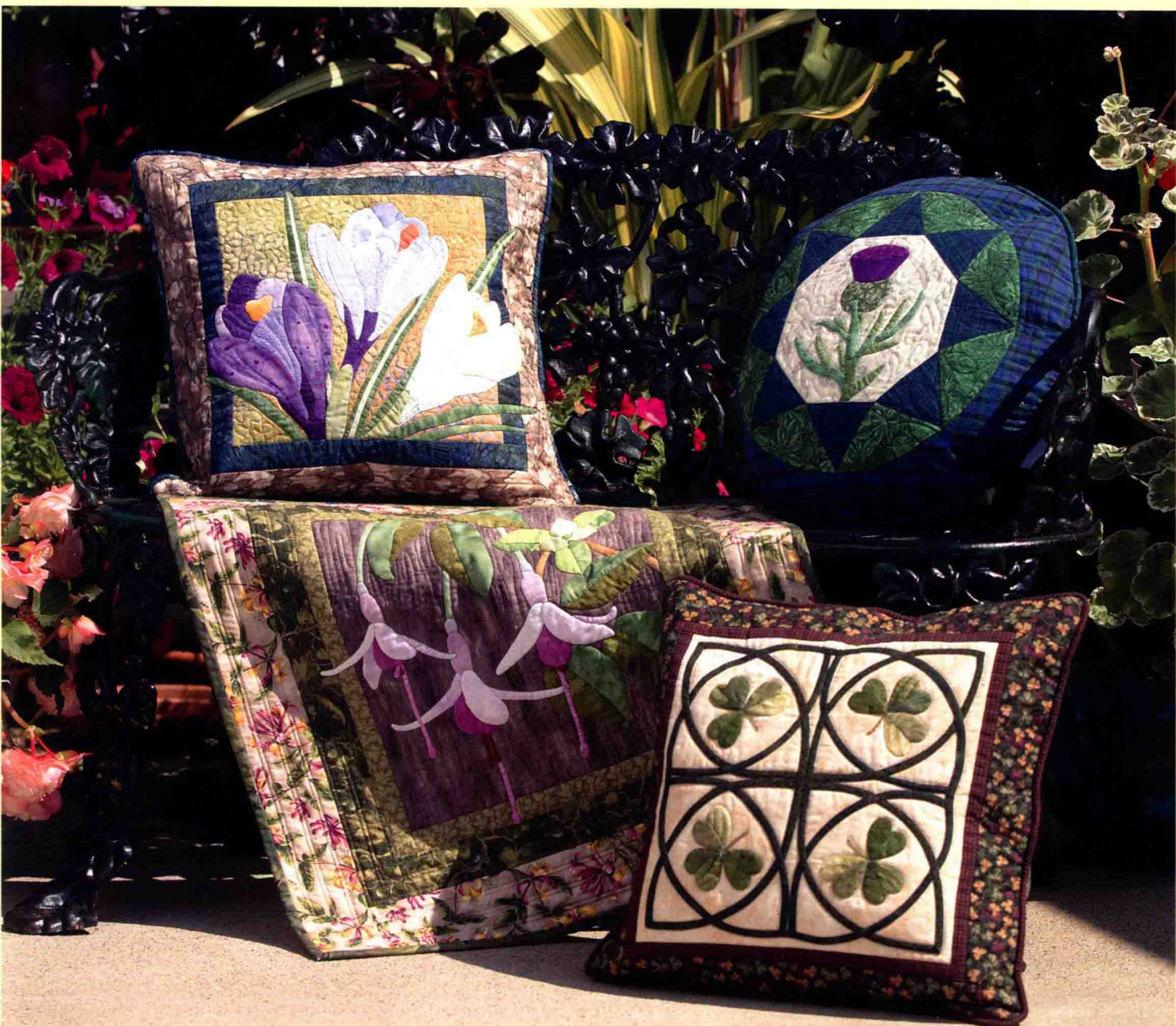
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Acknowledgments

*Thank you to my husband, Chris,
and my three children for their
support and understanding.*

*Thank you also to Barbara Greene,
who provided encouragement and
a push when I needed it.*







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Introduction

When my husband and I decided to relocate our family to Harrogate in northern England, it was definitely a leap of faith. Neither of us had ever left the North American continent, and we had heard a variety of opinions about what it would be like to live in England. As a fabricaholic, I was not sure if I could handle living in what some quilters affectionately call the “fabric desert.” It’s not that you can’t find fabric here, but rather that the variety is not as great as in the United States, and the cost is much higher.

What surprised me the most about England, though, was the gardens. You hear about English gardens, and even see photographs, but I expected that mostly the *public* gardens would be spectacular. However, many private homes have wonderful gardens as well. Being able to create and tend the perfect garden seems to be a source of great pride. Even those who have a relatively small amount of land still do what they can to fit in just the right assortment of plants and features to make it gorgeous. The television is full of gardening shows, and people putter about in their gardens to relax. Some homeowners spend a tremendous amount of money and care and then open their gardens to the public for donations to charity. The villages and towns compete for “Britain in Bloom” awards, bestowed by the Royal Horticultural Society each year to communities that show the highest achievement in horticultural and environmental skills. In fact, the town of Harrogate received a gold award in 2003.

I have to say that Colorado, where we lived before coming to England, has its own beauty. But you don’t see the spectacular abundance and variety of flowers that you see here. With so much inspiration, how could I not record it in some way? I’d collected hundreds of photographs, but I soon became inspired to re-create some of the glorious visions in fabric. The most difficult task is trying to keep up with the ideas. I decided to start small, with individual flowers. Some of the designs are more botanically correct than others, and by no means are these designs meant to be botanical sketches. Rather, the images that I have seen and photographed were the starting point, and the designs have evolved from that. But every design is based upon flowers that can be seen in everyday life, and hopefully you will find something that appeals to you and that will allow you to create your own vision of beauty in fabric.

My preferred method for re-creating flowers in fabric is hand appliqué. Instructions for the method I use are given in “The Appliqué Process,” which begins on page 12. The designs are certainly adaptable to other appliqué methods, but please read through this section so that you understand the pattern markings and assembly techniques. Each design is shown in two forms, as both a pillow and a wall hanging, so that you can get an idea of different colors and finishes.

Have fun creating your own English garden that never quits blooming!

~ Susan Taylor Propst

Crocuses in early March, The Stray, Harrogate. Photo by Jonathan Propst.



Choosing Fabrics



The key to cushions and quilts that bloom with spectacular flowers is in choosing the proper fabrics. I find fabric selection to be one of my favorite parts of the quilting process (second only to actually buying the fabric), but I know that isn't the case for everyone. If you're one of those quilters who is a little uncomfortable with this part, hopefully the information I share in this section will help you feel more confident about your fabric choices.

Quality

I highly recommend good-quality, 100%-cotton fabric. Good-quality cottons can last for several generations if cared for properly, and cotton maintains a crease when finger-pressed, which makes the appliqué process easier. Generally I am not too concerned about the thread count of the fabrics I purchase, unless the fabric is intended for a very intricate or narrow piece. In that case, it can be harder to make the fabric conform to the intended shape if you use a fabric with a loose weave, such as flannel, or a fabric with a heavy, stiff hand. Most of the designs in this book are not intricate enough for thread count to be an issue, but it is something you should be aware of.

Color

Color is an extremely individual thing, yet many quilters find that selecting colors for a project is a task they'd rather delegate to someone else. I have two simple rules that I share with my students to help them through the process. First, choose colors that please you—don't worry about what anyone else might think! For the projects in this book, you have a good starting place because Mother Nature has already picked her favorite colors. You may, however, choose to override her choices and use colors that are not natural to the flowers. Take the "Hydrangea" projects (page 77) for example. One of the pieces is completed in colors that are very similar to those you might find on an actual shrub. The other, with bold orange and pink hues, is not like any hydrangea I have seen, yet the colors work well with the design.

Now that I've told you to use colors that please you, the second thing to remember when choosing colors is to keep an open mind. Don't dismiss a color because you detest it; it might turn out to be the color that works best with the

rest of your palette. I try to buy fabrics from every choice on the color wheel, even if the fabric itself does not particularly appeal to me. There are very few colors that can't be used successfully within the right combination, and it's amazing how often those less-appealing fabrics are just what you need to make the other fabrics sparkle.



The yellow-green leaves in the example on top work much better with the other colors than the blue-green leaves used in the example on the bottom. Many people don't like yellowish greens and refuse to consider them.

However, if you look at the leaves and grasses in nature, the greens often tend much more toward yellow than toward blue.

Most of the time, your gut will tell you when colors work well together, but there are tools you can fall back on when you're having trouble making choices. One tool that I use often is the theory of color contrasts. Color experts have divided color contrast into several categories, but I usually use just three when making my choices—contrast of value, contrast of saturation, and complementary contrast. Understanding these different categories will help you make decisions based upon the effect that you wish to achieve in your piece.

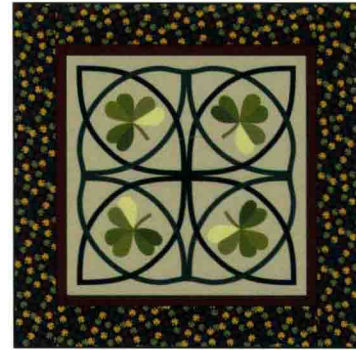
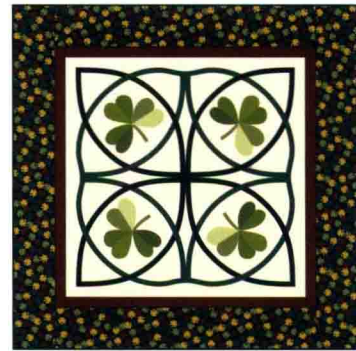
Contrast of Value

The first, and probably most important, type of contrast to consider is value. Value refers to how light or dark a color appears in relation to the colors around it. When selecting colors, make sure to include some light as well as dark values. Without this contrast, the piece can look very flat. In the photo below, the fabrics are grouped into relative value groups.



Fabrics arranged into vertical rows of light, medium, and dark values

If you find it difficult to determine a fabric's value, you may find it helpful to squint your eyes. The main goal is for the appliquéd pieces to have enough contrast that you can distinguish them from the background when you stand back and look at the overall effect. (Sometimes you can achieve this by other contrasts, as discussed later). Therefore, an important consideration in appliqué is the color of the background fabric. If your flowers are primarily light colors, it would be best to choose a darker-value background so that the flowers stand out. And, conversely, if the flowers are a dark value, a lighter background would probably work better. Flowers in the medium range could work with either a light or dark background. If you are comfortable with value, a medium-value background could be used, but because most greens for leaves run in this range, it can be more difficult to make this combination work.



The two illustrations demonstrate how value translates into a quilt. The quilt on top shows how the Celtic design and darker shamrocks contrast against the light-value background. The quilt on the bottom uses fabrics with much more similar values, resulting in a quieter, less striking effect.

Contrast of Saturation

Saturation refers to how close the color is to the pure hue. If a color has been mixed with white, black, gray, or an opposite color, the saturation is reduced. Less-saturated colors are often called tints, tones, or shades.

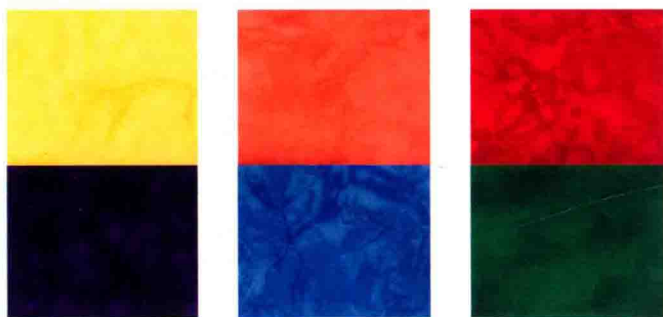


The colors in the middle row are more highly saturated than the colors in the top and bottom rows.

If all the colors in a project are pure hues, the eye can get a bit overwhelmed. Sometimes a very effective result can be produced by combining colors with different saturations. The most highly saturated color will look more striking as a result.

Complementary Contrast

Each color has an opposite on the color wheel, and when opposites are placed next to each other, the resulting contrast seems to make both colors appear more striking and intense. For example, when green is placed next to red, the green looks more green than with any other color, and the red looks more red. You also get nice effects when the complements are not pure hues.



Complementary colors

Print

In addition to considering the value of a fabric, it is important to consider a fabric's printed design. Busy designs can work well in some segments of your quilts but might be too distracting for others. Here are some general guidelines to follow as you select the fabrics for specific areas of your project.

Background

If the background fabric has a strong design or color, it will compete with the appliqué pieces. You don't want to spend time appliquéing just to have the pieces disappear into the background! The three illustrations at right show the same appliques on different backgrounds. The first illustration uses a background fabric that allows the flowers and leaves to be the focal point. The background fabric in the second illustration has similar color to the first, but because the design is so strong (particularly due to the strong value contrast), it competes with the flowers and draws too much attention from them. The third illustration uses a busy

background fabric printed with shapes and colors similar to the flowers, leaving the appliques all but lost.



A subtle background allows the flowers to be the focal point.



The strong design of this background draws attention from the flowers.



The flowers blend into this busy background.

Another option to consider is a pieced background. It is possible to strategically place desired values behind the appliqué pieces to allow them to stand out. I used this technique for the "Welsh Daffodil" wall hanging (page 49). The yellow flowers would not have stood out well against the pale background, so I added a purple circle to the background to solve this problem.



The fabrics on the left are more suitable background choices than the busy fabrics on the right.

Appliqué Pieces

You can enjoy a tremendous amount of latitude when selecting fabrics for the appliqué pieces. You may decide that you want the pieces to be representative of an actual flower and then search for fabrics to achieve that goal. For example, in the “Crocus” pillow, I used a wonderful print with a vein texture for some of the crocus petals.



A crocus petal with vein-textured fabric

Using one representational fabric, however, does not mean that all the fabrics you choose must be representational. Often you may find fabric that suits only a portion of your design. I think the piece is actually more interesting if it is not too “real.” Feel free to throw in any fabric, including plaids, paisleys, and so on. The only fabrics that I don’t really recommend are solids. They are fine for very small pieces, but for a larger area a solid can look a bit flat compared to a textured piece. There are plenty of wonderful hand-dyed and tone-on-tone fabrics that can take the place of solids.



A selection of good appliqué fabrics

Once you have chosen candidates for the appliqué pieces, you will need to figure out which fabrics adjoin or overlap other fabrics. When I am choosing fabrics for a flower with overlapping petals, such as the rose in the “English Rose” wall hanging (page 27), I have to consider whether each fabric will stand out.



Careful fabric selection prevents adjoining petals from blurring together.

This relates back to the discussion of value and contrast. If you appliqué a number of petals and there is not enough contrast, the entire flower may end up looking like a big blob. Consider varying the textures and values, and perhaps even the hue a bit so that each petal shows up well. If you have a fabric with a range of values, you can even fussy cut pieces so that light portions of the fabric are used on one petal and darker portions on another. It also adds dimension if the pieces in the foreground are lighter than those in the background. Once you have decided which fabrics to use, cut out all the pieces and lay them in place on the background fabric. While the finished project won't look exactly the same, you will get a good idea of whether the fabrics all work well together. At this stage, before you begin appliquéing, you can make any necessary changes without the inconvenience of removing pieces that have already been stitched.

Border

Unlike the background fabric, the sky is the limit when selecting a fabric for the border. Many of the same fabrics that would make poor backgrounds would work well as a border. I often choose the border fabric after I have selected the background and appliqué fabrics, but that can be risky because you may have difficulty finding just the right one. If you start with the border fabric, you can use the color bar that runs along the selvage edge to help with selecting

the other fabrics. The color bar contains the individual colors that were used to print the fabric. For more of a spark, choose colors that are slightly lighter or darker than the ones on the color bar. In the "Hydrangea" cushion (page 78), the purple fabric I chose for the hydrangea was close to the color on the color bar, but not an exact match.



The fabric color bar shows the colors used to print the fabric.

The color and texture of the border fabric need to enhance the appliqué image without dominating it. Beware of yellow, which can be particularly strong and dominant. Plaids and stripes are fine to use, but because of their linear design, the borders will look best if you miter the corners.



❧ *Playing with Paint* ❧

If you can't find the exact color you seek, consider using fabric paints. Find a white or cream fabric, or a fabric with a color close to the one you want, with a texture you like. Then use transparent fabric paints to alter the color to suit you. Experiment with a small piece of fabric until you're satisfied. To get a more even distribution of color, wet the fabric before you paint it. A hand-dyed look can be achieved by painting on dry fabric. Follow the paint manufacturer's instructions to heat-set your finished fabric to make the color permanent.



The Appliqué Process



Cardoon flower; photo by author

The instructions given here describe my preferred techniques for hand appliqué, but the patterns for the projects are adaptable to other methods. Keep in mind, however, that fusible appliqué might not be durable enough for cushions that will be handled a lot. If you plan to use an appliqué method other than the hand techniques given here, note that the patterns do not include seam allowances and the shapes have not been reversed.

Creating a Placement Guide

The first step is to create a guide for placing the appliqués on the background fabric. Rather than tracing the design directly onto the fabric, I like to trace the design onto a plastic or vinyl overlay. You can purchase sheets of clear plastic or lightweight vinyl yardage for this purpose, or you can recycle plastic. The plastic needs to be fairly firm and large enough to contain the entire appliqué design. Dry-cleaner bags are a bit too thin, but I have successfully used the plastic wrapping from new shirts. It feels so economical to reuse something that I would ordinarily throw away! Use a

permanent marker to trace the entire design onto the plastic, including the numbers on each appliqué shape and the border lines, where given.

Along with using the overlay to position your appliqué pieces, you can also use it to audition your fabric choices before you begin to stitch. Just cut out the appliqué pieces as described below, place the overlay over the background fabric, and slide the pieces into place. Although the project will look a bit different once the pieces are stitched, you will be able to see if the chosen colors work well together. You can even pin the appliqué pieces to the plastic, and then audition a variety of potential background fabrics.

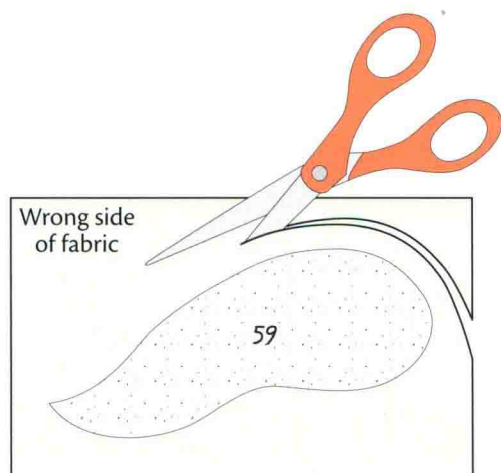


A plastic overlay with pieces underneath

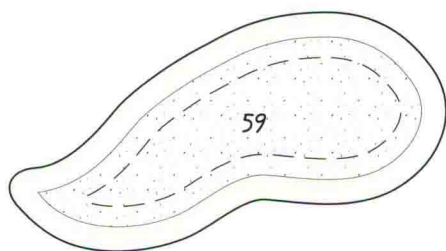
Preparing the Appliqués

You will need to make a freezer-paper template for each appliqué piece. To do this, lay a piece of freezer paper, *shiny side up*, over the pattern. Using a mechanical pencil, trace around each numbered shape, leaving a little bit of space around each one. Cut out each template on the marked line. Do not add seam allowances. Write the number of each piece on the dull side of the template. Place each shape, *shiny side down*, on the wrong side of the chosen fabric. Using a hot, dry iron, press the freezer-paper templates onto the

fabrics. Cut around each piece, leaving a seam allowance of approximately $\frac{3}{16}$ ".



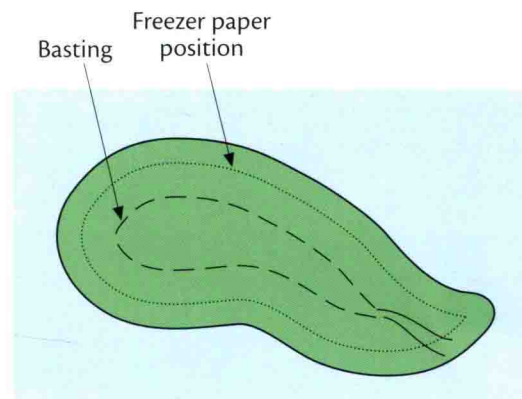
Occasionally I find that the freezer paper does not adhere well to the fabric, particularly when I am stitching pieces together prior to appliquéing them to the background. If you encounter this problem, baste around the edges of the freezer paper by hand or machine after ironing the freezer paper to the fabric. Once the piece is appliquéed, the basting is easily removed.



Positioning and Stitching the Appliqués

1. Prepare the background piece as instructed for the individual project. For many of the designs, you will need to add one or more of the borders to the background fabric first because the appliqués extend onto them.
2. Position the overlay over the background piece, right sides up. For projects on which borders have been added, align the border placement lines marked on the overlay with the border seam lines. For all other projects, follow the project instructions for aligning the overlay on the background.

3. Slide appliqué piece 1 under the overlay so that it is aligned beneath the corresponding shape of the design. Remove the overlay. Baste or pin the appliqué in place. If you baste, make sure the stitching is not within the $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance, which will be turned under. If pinning, use $\frac{3}{4}$ " appliqué pins.



❧ Safe and Secure ❧

If the plastic isn't too stiff, you can baste it along one edge of the fabric background (outside of the design area). This makes it much easier to position the pieces correctly. This also makes my work-in-progress easier to take with me when I travel, because I don't have to keep track of the plastic—it is always attached! When stitching, lift the plastic out of the way. Once the appliqué is completed, simply pull out the basting stitches to remove the plastic.

4. With the thread still on the spool, thread a size 10 or 11 straw or milliner's needle with a 50- or 60-weight cotton thread in a color that matches the appliqué. If you can't find an exact color match, choose one that is slightly darker, or use a neutral color (gray or beige) that matches the value of the appliqué fabric. Cut the thread, preferably no longer than the distance from your elbow to your fingertips. Thread longer than this tends to tangle and wear thin. Knot the end of the thread.
5. If possible, begin stitching along the straightest edge of the appliqué. If you are right-handed, you will probably