

WEAVING WITH LINEN

We asked some experienced weavers for their opinions and ideas on these specific questions:

1. *Why do you weave with linen?*
2. *Is there a better time or more suitable place for weaving with linen?*
3. *What do you do when a linen warp is playing up?*
4. *Are there some particular knacks you have developed for weaving with linen?*
5. *Do you have any wishes with regard to the yarns available today?*

Berit Grybäck,
weave tutor at Capellagården, handweaver.

1. For me, linen is the obvious fibre to use both when it comes to my own weaving and when I teach. We grow and process flax at Capellagården and I have inherited or received thank you gifts of countless skeins of linen, which I want to put to the best possible use.

2. I do not have any strategies when it comes to weaving linen, i.e. to weave or not to weave with respect to a season or place. Naturally it makes it a bit easier if the air in the premises is not too dry and if the warp beam is not right by a hot radiator.

3. Misting the air over the warp between the shafts and the back bar with a fine spray of water from a plant spray. It is important not to leave too long a gap between weaving sessions, rather keeping the warp consistently damp and maintaining a rhythm to the weaving. Sometimes I put a cloth over the pedals to protect them from things like water stains.

4. "Nice and calm": all weaves rely on rhythm and peace in the way they are woven, but in my experience, linen weaves need a little extra in the way of centredness in the weaver. I finish a day of weaving by winding up slim bobbins and leaving them in a damp towel for the following day. This helps particularly when weaving with unbleached singles linen yarns.

5. More fine two-ply linen yarns, dyed and bleached to different degrees, such as 35/2 and 50/2.

Winnie Poulsen, weave tutor at different courses,
textile artist, handweaver.

1. Linen is lustrous and lovely to look at. It absorbs half its weight again of water without feeling wet, which is a great advantage for all kinds of towels and fabric for summer clothes. I have linen sheets in my bed – not all woven by me – slipping into them is such a pleasure.

2. If the room is very dry, the linen yarn opens out and sheds a lot of fibre.

3. Use a plant spray to spray water behind the heddles or lay a damp cloth on the warp overnight. If the yarn is also fine and sensitive, spray with starch or dressing the warp with a linseed decoction. Should the warp seem weak even before beaming, it is best to starch it in a linseed decoction (page 36).

4. Linen can't deal with mechanical wear and tear. Open small, even sheds, use low shuttles (the best is a weighted damask shuttle) and a stretcher. Always beat down first in the open shed, so the weft does not wear out the warp, then beat just once more – if needed, bearing in mind that linen thread should be touched or moved as little as possible. Wind bobbins the day before weaving. If several strands are being wound together, you can pass the yarn over a damp cloth held in one hand as you wind the bobbins. Moisture aids the release of a little of the natural glue in the linen yarn, which helps the strands being wound together to stick to each other.

5. I have a stock of bleached 16/1 Nm linen, good for warps, which I especially prize. It is important to be careful when selecting linen yarn to get the quality you want.

Marie Ekstedt Bjersing, weave tutor, Sätergläntan
Institute of Handicrafts, handweaver.

1. Linen has strength, sheen, a certain rigidity and is a material that needs to be listened to. It can be challenging to weave with linen, but mostly it is sheer fun.

2. Of course, if it is too dry in the immediate surroundings, this makes it harder to weave with linen, whilst there is also so much to be learnt about a technique.

3. First of all, review everything to do with the weaving itself: thickness of the weft, the bobbins, how the shuttle is thrown, how the shuttle is removed, the beat, the pedalling and the tension of the warp. In reviewing the technical aspects, I should mention we always use a thicker linen weft. Never open a shed and beat down without throwing in a pick. This has often been enough. On occasion we have sized a warp with a linseed decoction.

4. As linen has little elasticity, I am careful with how I tension the warp, and don't make it too hard. The tension comes in when opening a shed. I am careful to pull the shuttle straight out, so that edge ends don't suffer unnecessary wear and tear. Bobbins need to be firm. If I am weaving plain weave in linen, I don't generally need a stretcher. For other techniques, I do use a stretcher and move it forward at frequent intervals. For a denser sett linen cloth, I tend to go for a lower dentage of reed and sley three ends to a dent instead.

5. I would really like, above all, yarns to be set better. There is often a build up of twist if ends are allowed to hang free when entering and if weaving on a very slack warp. I would like to have more warp yarns with a higher twist and weft yarns with less twist. And I would also like to know where the flax fibre came from and how the retting was done. More organic linen yarns.

Ingela Berntsson, textile artist, designer
also for Våxbo Lin, handweaver.

1. There is nothing else as beautiful! Linen fabric has a radiance that has an effect on everyone. Nothing else filters light so well as a linen curtain. Linen is the best fibre for handtowels, bath towels, dishcloths and floor cloths, nothing else absorbs moisture so well and dries off quickly.

2. The right place varies according to the time of year. The loom should not be near a radiator in winter, nor in a sunny room that gets hot in summer. The warp should not be in direct sunlight. Don't let flies get at the warp. Fly poo on fine linen thread will make it snap after a while.

3. I put a damp cloth over the warp behind the heddles when I am weaving and over the whole exposed warp when not weaving. Place a bowl of water under the loom. If the edge ends have had it, you can add/substitute two ends on the very edge in cotton yarn and hang weights off them at the back (with curtains, for example, you don't want the thread doubled up on the edges).

4. The most important thing is being really careful when warping and beaming so that all the ends are tensioned equally. There won't be any compensatory movement in the yarn when weaving is underway, the yarn is quite inert. I insert the yarn as generously as possible, but not that it buckles. I make it lie in a wide arc up as far as the reed, change shed to spread the yarn and then beat down. The weaving width has to stay the same as the width in the reed, otherwise the outer ends will soon wear away and you get major problems with ends breaking on the sides as well as a bit further in. I do put the warp under quite a bit of tension and don't release the tension when away from the loom. I don't wind more yarn off into bobbins than I am going to need in a day. If the yarn lies for some time wound into bobbins, it gets curly and then it is difficult to keep a check on how much gets inserted with each pick. NEVER pull on or fiddle with the edge ends! If something needs correcting, only ever do so with the weft. The edge ends otherwise start lengthening ever so quickly.

5. A greater selection would be my wish. More yarns bleached to different degrees. Strong fine yarn that can be used for warps. Fine two-ply yarns. Tow yarn.

Hans Thomsson, damask weaver.

1. I weave with linen for its unbeatable quality in damask woven tablecloths and napkins.

2. I am pretty well set up regarding premises so I can weave whenever. An erstwhile dairy with tiled walls and a slightly damp environment. Though once, when spring arrived and I opened up the doors, considerably more ends went in the warp! The doors stay shut now.

3. + 4. I mostly weave dräll and damask in singles linen.

Be aware of any drawing in and not putting the warp under too much tension. Better to sley a few more ends per dent and use a reed with a lower dentage when weaving with singles yarn.

5. I still have a lot of older yarns in my stock so I don't really buy much new linen.

Ingrid Skagerström, weave tutor, handweaver.

1. Using and working with linen is fun. You get a lovely result and quality functional goods.

2. I like working with linen yarn and do so anywhere, any time of the year, just avoid having the loom in direct sunlight.

3. If the linen is old and not been stored well, e.g. exposed to sunlight, it can be brittle and then you need to raise the humidity in the air by spraying water into the air above the weave. The humidity level of the room can also be raised by putting a bucket of water under the loom.

4. The most important things when weaving linen are having the warp under the right tension, not drawing in at the edges so the sides get worn and not winding the warp too far forward so there is unnecessary wear and tear. If the warp sett is high, take a reed with a lower dentage and sley more ends to a dent, for example change a 90/10 reed with 2 ends to a dent down to 60/10 with 3 ends to a dent.

5. I am puzzled why some makes of linen yarn have a tendency for the yarn to stick together and snarl up behind the heddles while others can be woven right through without any twisting. Is this to do with coarser fibre or the plying?*

Åsa Pärson, weave tutor at HV School,
designer and handweaver.

1. For the feel, lustre and lovely way it combines with thicker silk and cotton yarn.

2. August is the best month in my view; January terrible ...

3. My linen usually behaves fine. If it is colder out and more dry inside, I usually spray with water. Or get a damp cloth and hang it over the loom.

4. I ALWAYS use a stretcher. Dampening the edges by spraying with water before putting in the stretcher. I never do anything special with the selvages. Wind on after ca 10–15 cm. Hard tension. The diagonal of the weft inserted depends on the weave itself and varies.

5. I mostly weave with fine linen, Nm 44 and 60. The thicker yarns aren't as lovely.

Elsa Persson, handweaver, damask weaver.

1. Linen has such beautiful natural nuances. It has a wonderful lustre after being cold mangled.

2. I have linen weaves set up all through the year, in fairly cool surroundings with a good level of humidity in the air. I also put bowls of water under the warp. Avoid warm, dry, sunny places.

3. If the linen has a tendency to snap, I use lace thread for the ends in the outermost 4 dents. If necessary, I brush the warp with size, dressing it from the heddles to the back bar. Using a fine horsehair brush. (Elsa Persson's recipe is one page 37.)

4. When warping, I use a warping paddle and make several warp chains, so the wider the weave, the greater the number of chains. And I use Öxabäck's beaming assistant with weights. Keep the warp under a good amount of tension and advance it frequently. I always use a stretcher and do not release the tension when away from the loom. Bobbins are wound a bit before.

5. I would like linen that is strong, even and without any slubby bits. The finer the linen, the more beautiful the cloth.

* Ed note: We asked Margareta Larsson at Holma Helsingland about this and she told us that it is mostly plied yarns that can, if set badly, have something called twist liveliness. Check this by dangling a length of yarn and seeing if it snarls.