Free Information Note No.2

Making a domed lace pillow

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The Domed Lace Pillow

In England, Australia and New Zealand, domed pillows are referred to as ‘mushroom’ pillows and in North America they are often referred to as ‘cookie’ pillows.

Lace pillows come in a variety of shapes and sizes according to the type of lace being worked, the style of bobbin used and the country of origin. The domed pillow has a flat base and a gently domed top surface. It is a generally useful shape to work with for a range of lace types. The purpose of the dome is to allow those bobbins, not in immediate use, to fall a short distance away to the side. Pillows that have a flat surface do not allow the bobbins to fall away from the working area, which interrupts the flow of the work.

Commercially made lace pillows are available in various shapes and sizes and with different fillings, depending on the country and maker. In recent years, pillows moulded and cut from blocks of high-density styrofoam and polystyrene have become quite common.

Should you wish to make your own pillow though, and you have the space in which to do so, the tools or suitable substitutes and access to suitable filling material, then it is well worth doing. The whole process takes a while but pillow making can be immense fun, especially if there are small children in the household.

When I started lacemaking in the early 1970’s, the first thing every new student in the class had to do was make their own pillow. That first pillow is still in operation, although somewhat soggy and in need of re-stuffing now.

Over the years I have made four pillows and purchased three others. I have a preference for handmade pillows but only because I can pull them apart as needed, to add more filling when they begin to get soggy. Commercial pillows are generally not constructed in a way that allows you to easily open them up, fill and close them again.

Pillows vary in size, both in the height and the base diameter. The rise of the dome may be as low as 1inch (2.5cm) or as high as 4inches (10cm) but, you must be aware that the higher the dome, the more stuffing and the heavier the pillow. I consider a rise of 1 1/2 - 2inches (3.2-5cm) in the middle of the dome to be perfectly adequate, and sometimes more than required. The diameter of a pillow will depend on the type of projects you are undertaking. The size range is normally 18inch/45cm (small), 20inch/50cm (medium) or 24inch/60cm (large).

I suggest beginners make a medium size pillow with a base diameter of 20inches/50cm. This is a useful middle range size that will be adequate for most lace projects, from practice strips through to prickings with a width/diameter of 7inches/18cm. Larger prickings will fit on but the working is less comfortable.

Detailed instruction is given below for a 20inch/50cm pillow. If you wish to make a pillow of a different size, refer to the end of the document where I give formulae for the fabric requirements. If you want a higher or lower dome, the

Making a domed lace pillow

Section A

General discussion

Measurements given below are for a pillow with a base diameter of 20inches/50cm.

Making a pillow in summer is much easier than in the winter, as you will gather as you read on further. You should understand though, that this is not a speedy process at any time because you have to stop and start and stop and start.

You will need a flat-faced mallet to beat down the filling. Use either a wooden mallet with a nice smooth face, or a rubber mallet. If necessary, substitute a wooden rolling pin or a strong plastic bottle filled with sand. Moisten the sand with a little water so the sand packs down, adding more sand and a little more water as needed.

Later on, the pillow must be walked on or jumped on and I recommend the pounding feet of small children for this part. My children always thought this part of pillow making was great fun.

Tools needed

- A crosscut saw for cutting by hand or an electric Jig-saw.
- Small hammer to tap in the thumbtacks
- Medium grade sandpaper
- Sharp scissors
- Brass thumbtacks
- Wood glue, preferably water based such as *Aqadhere*
- Marking pencil
- Pair of compasses or string
- Adhesive tape (masking tape or similar)
- Thick newspaper
- Old knife or scissor blade to lift the thumbtacks

Materials

The filling:

Pea straw, meadow hay, or *sea grass*[*] thoroughly dried and coarsely chopped (approximately 5cm/2in lengths) before using. Sterilized coconut fiber purchased from garden supply shops/plant nurseries is also suitable.

Do not use wheat straw unless nothing else is available (too coarse), sawdust (too heavy, and it shifts as you work), barley or rice husks (too much hard work, makes a very heavy pillow and breaks down too soon).

Some pet shops sell bags of pea straw or meadow hay for pet rabbits and this should already be thoroughly dried. Some gardening supply shops sell pea straw as garden

[*] I have not used this material myself but it has been used by others.

mulch but it may be damp, so you must make absolutely certain that you dry it out thoroughly before use.

The straw ***must be dry*** or you will have a fermenting pillow, a variety of wildlife crawling out of it and badly acid attacked pins, depending on how wet it is. Check the dryness by placing some in a clear plastic/polythene bag. Seal the bag thoroughly and sit it in a warm place. If the straw is damp, moisture will soon form on the inner surface of the plastic.

If the straw needs to be dried it is a slow process***.*** In summer weather you can lay it out on a dry surface and keep turning it, over several days/weeks, until it has dried out. The alternative is to chop it up when damp and dry it in either a drying cupboard or an oven, **using very low heat**. If you use the oven approach, you must work with very small quantities, placed in roasting/baking pans. ***Do not attempt to use a Microwave oven, as the straw will ignite.***

Chop the straw into short lengths[†], discarding any really thick hard stalks. After chopping it, drop it into a large plastic/polythene bag along with an insecticide strip of the type you hang in wardrobes. Seal the bag and leave a few hours, then shake it up and leave a few more hours. ***Take the bag outdoors before unsealing it and do not inhale the vapours as you open the bag.*** Remove the pest strip and leave the straw to air before using.

Coconut fiber does not need chopping but it comes in the form of flattened disks of compressed fiber and these must be pulled apart before using.

The wooden baseboard

Purchase a square of Chipboard (Particleboard) a little larger than the measurement for the base diameter[‡] and 1/2 or 3/4 inch/12 or15mm thick. The board does not need to be ¾ of an inch/15mm (1.5cm) thick but it is sometimes the only thickness available. The thicker the board, the heavier the pillow is to carry about.

After measuring and cutting the circle of wood, quickly smooth the side and rims with medium grade sandpaper.

Section B

> For the following fabric measurements and pillow making, work with only one set of dimensions; choose either the metric or the inches **but not both. The two are not interchangeable.**

[†] Straw can be chopped by hand with gardening sheers, or you can run a mower over it. Be sure to spread the straw onto a pathway and use the grass catcher to collect it as you run the mower over the pile. Do not turn it into chaff though.

[‡] Wood yards and some hardware shops will cut the board to your diameter specifications, without any problems. If you are cutting the board yourself, you must purchase a square of board a little larger than the diameter of the circle required for the base, or you will have a pillow with flat sides.

Pillow fabric

Use strong fabric such as strong calico, ticking or denim. Fabrics with a tight weave will not stretch as far as fabrics with a loose weave. The looser the weave, the greater the stretch in the fabric and the higher the final dome of the pillow. High domed pillows are not as easy to use as pillows with slight domes.

Fabric 54inches/140cm in width is a more economical buy than fabric 36inches/90cm wide.

You need two squares of fabric; one for the base cover and one for the bag.

You will need the following:

Inches	Metric
Fabric 54inches wide: 1yd	Fabric 140cm wide: 70cm length
Fabric 36inches wide:1and 5/8th yards or 1and 3/4 yards	Fabric 90cm wide: 140cm/1.4m length

Method

Fabric: Iron/press the fabric then square it.

Measure and cut two pieces of fabric:

1x25inches square for the base and	1x68cm square for the base and
1x26inches square for the bag	1x70cm square for the bag

Lay out the cut cloth pieces and mark the centre point of each piece. (If necessary, fold the fabric into four and press the centre point of the fold with an iron).

Use either a pair of compasses or the string and pencil method to draw the circles. (*See Free Information Sheet No.2**:'Making pillow covers and cover cloths**')*

.**Remember**: You are setting the compasses/string length to the *radius measurement,* which is *half the width* of each fabric square*.*

> Wear old work clothes or other protective covering when gluing the fabric to the board.

1. Cloth for covering the base board

Lay the smaller fabric square over a hard surface or thick pad of newspaper. Tape the edges of the cloth securely to the surface of the newspaper pad, or secure with thumbtacks.

Adjust the compasses/string length to a *radius measurement* that is *fractionally smaller* than half the width measurement of the fabric square.

Draw a circle to give you a cutting line. The drawn curve should lie just inside the edge of the fabric.

Re-set the compasses/string length to the *radius measurement* of the board (10inches/25cm).

Draw this second, smaller diameter circle. Remove the fabric from the newspaper.

2. The bag for the pillow

Do not alter the compass/string length setting yet.

Secure the larger fabric square to the newspaper, as before.

Using the existing compass setting/string length, draw a circle equal in diameter to the baseboard.

Depending on the strength of the fabric being used, this setting should give you a rise of approximately 32+mm (1-1/2in), if you want a higher dome, then increase the compass/string length by not more than 2 to 3mm (1/12-1/8in).

Re-set the compasses/string length to a *radius measurement* that is *fractionally smaller* than half the width of the larger fabric square.

Draw this second circle. The drawn curve should lie just inside the edge of the fabric.

Cut away the excess fabric from both squares, cutting outside the line of the larger circles.

3. Covering the base board:

Work with the pencil lines on the outside.

Decide which is the rougher side of the board and mark that surface as B. Mark the other surface as A.

Use sandpaper to reduce the worst of the roughness on both surfaces.

Lay the base fabric over surface A of the board, matching the inner pencil line (or increased diameter line) to the rim of the board. Push in ONE thumbtack as a locating point. Do not remove.

Lift the fabric off the board and over the top of the thumbtack.

Smear a thick layer of wood glue over surface A. Leave five minutes, or according to instructions on the container.

Lay the fabric over the top of the glue and carefully flatten it with your hand, forcing out all air pockets, and matching the inner pencil line to the rim of the board. When the fabric is thoroughly smooth, push or gently hammer some thumbtacks partway into the board. They should be a short distance in from the edge, at intervals of approximately 5cm (2"). These tacks are temporary, so don't hammer them in too hard.

The fabric must now be glued to the side (thickness) of the board and after that, the overlap fabric will be glued onto surface B.

Apply glue liberally over the side of the board.

Working section by section, pull the cloth up over the side and secure it with a few widely spaced thumbtacks. Do not tap the thumbtacks all the way down.

Apply glue onto surface B, just for the width of the excess fabric.

Pleat or fold the excess fabric and pin it with thumbtacks, pinning along the edge of the fabric at intervals of approximately 2inches/5cm. These thumbtacks remain in the board permanently, tap them down firmly.

Put the covered board somewhere out of the way and weight it down with something. Allow the glue to dry for at least twelve hours.

When the glue has dried, remove the thumbtacks from surface A of the board and from around the edge.

4. Preparing the fabric top

When the glue has dried on the base, you must fit the top cloth over surface B[§]***.***

This time, work little by little, smearing glue onto the fabric around the side (thickness) of the board and pushing in the thumbtacks as you progress.

Sit on a kitchen chair. Prop the board on phone books or a support of some type, to raise it to a comfortable working height. Hold the board between your knees to steady it as you work.

With the pencil lines on the fabric facing outward, place the fabric against surface B.

Line up the inner pencil line with the top rim of the board, as before.

Push a thumbtack into the side of the board, just below the top rim.

Rotate the board for approximately 1/4 of the circle. Push a second thumbtack into the fabric as before. ***This section of fabric must remain open for filling.***

From now on, the fabric should be glued and tacked section by section with the thumbtacks spaced approximately 2inches/5cm apart. Position the thumbtacks just below the rim of surface B. Do not tap them all the way in.

Turn the board over so the bottom (covered surface) is facing up. The excess fabric of the top cloth must be ***glued to the base fabric.*** Pleat and glue the fabric section by section, securing the pleated fabric to the base with thumbtacks. Leave at least twelve hours to dry.

When the glue has dried, remove the thumbtacks from the pleated excess***.*** Those around the side of the board remain in place until the pillow has been stuffed fully.

Filling the bag

A hand filled straw pillow cannot be made too hard. It is highly unlikely that anyone filling a pillow by hand could achieve a pillow that is too hard to push pins into. Make it as solid as you possible but remember that fabric will split if stretched beyond its limits.

Lay the straw in layers across the flatness of the board. If you fill the bag from edge to edge, you may find you end up with hard, vertical ridges.

Stuff in as much straw as you can fit in at one go. Pin down the opening, sit the pillow on its base and use a mallet to beat the surface to pack down the straw.

Repeat the filling and beating until you ***think*** you cannot fit in any more.

From now on, the pillow must be walked on and jumped on and this is where small children are a boon. Place the pillow in a heavy traffic area of the house and make sure it is stepped on or jumped on, every time you and/or other people walk through, or find a more creative method of doing it. Continue the stuffing process until you cannot squeeze in another stalk.

To seal the opening, secure the fabric at the side, just below the top rim. Place the thumbtacks close together and tap them in firmly. Pry them out for refilling.

[§] If you have increased the diameter of the fabric circle for the bag, I suggest you avoid the use of glue at this next stage, and just fasten the fabric to the sides of the baseboard using closely spaced thumbtacks. When you are sure the dome height is what you want, then you can glue the overlap allowance to the base. If you choose to retain the thumbtacks instead of gluing the fabric, then to prevent them causing damage to your furniture as you work you must cover them some sort of padding inside the pillow cover.

When the glue has dried, remove all visible thumbtacks EXCEPT those securing the opening of the bag. Cover the pillow with a loose cover (pillow cover) before using.

Section C

Working out the measurements for a pillow of a different size

Decide the diameter/width of the baseboard.

Decide the approximate height of the pillow dome.

To work out the next part, you must know the thickness of the board, so purchase the board before you purchase any fabric.

Formula for finding the fabric measurement for the baseboard cover

Find the radius measurement of the baseboard (base diameter divided by 2).

Radius of board + board thickness + overlap onto surface B** = subtotal. Subtotal multiplied by 2 = total measurement for each side of the fabric square for the base cover.

Formula for finding the fabric measurement for the pillow bag

Radius of board + board thickness + fabric overlap onto covered base = subtotal. Subtotal multiplied by 2 + half the desired dome height = the total measurement for each side of the fabric square for the bag††.

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Note:
Before travelling across State borders or to other countries, taking any lace pillow made from organic material, check what restrictions may apply by contacting the Customs Department.

** The overlap should not be less than 2inches/5cm

†† Allowance must be made for the stretch of the fabric as the bag is being stuffed. You can usually expect the fabric to stretch at least a quarter, and up to a half more than the dome allowance.