

HOW TO CLEAN AN OLD QUILT

This information is meant as a guide. Only you can weigh the benefits of washing against the risk of further, maybe irreparable, damage to old, fragile fabrics. I've assembled these tips based on my own experiences and research. I like working with vintage pieces, and have some experience, but I am not a textile expert and cannot assume any responsibility for damage to your quilt. This information is meant to help you make your best decision and how to go about it.

How to clean an old quilt depends a lot on its condition. If it's only mildly dirty, maybe musty smelling, you may not need to wash it at all. Try briefly fluffing it in a dryer set on delicate and include a dryer sheet. Watch it carefully, as old seams can come apart. Newer quilts can generally be safely washed on delicate cool cycle in a washing machine.

Really old quilts should be washed by hand, if at all. Very delicate fabrics can be damaged by washing. If it must be washed, hand wash in a bathtub. Do not wash it in a washing machine, and don't have it dry cleaned.

Check for damaged seams, fabric tears, anything that could come loose during washing. Hand-pieced quilts are often more fragile than those sewn by machine. Be aware that some stains may not come out. Just consider them age spots. White fabrics that have yellowed with age may become brighter with washing, but not always. Test any dark colors for bleeding (reds especially).

If it is stained, or is visibly dirty, hand wash it in a bathtub of cool-to-lukewarm water. Lay a sheet in the bottom of the bathtub. Use a mild soap (not detergent) such as Mane & Tail (feed supply stores), Woolite or Quilt Soap (try Walmart fabric department). There's also a product called RetroClean, which is designed for use on old fabrics, and you may have to check online. Add the soap to the water before putting the quilt in so it has a chance to dissolve and distribute evenly in the water.

Lay the quilt loosely in the water. Use your hands to push it up and down to agitate the water. Let it soak awhile (even several hours or overnight), agitating from time to time. Then, with the quilt still in the tub and on top of the sheet, let the water drain. Fill the tub with cool water, agitate with your hands, drain and repeat several times until the water is clear. Leave the quilt in the tub for a while so more water will drain from the quilt.

Now have a friend help you lift the sheet, supporting the wet quilt (the wet quilt will be heavy), and take it outside or into your garage or onto your porch. Lay sheet and quilt reasonably flat. Try to keep it out of the sun but allow it to air dry, with good air circulation. You want it to dry fast enough that it doesn't mildew. It's a good idea to lay another old sheet on top of it while it's drying if you're concerned about dust or birds. Don't hang it over a clothesline because the wet fabric will pull and can damage the seams. When not drippy, you can also lay it on your living room floor to finish drying. Leave the ceiling fan on. Once it's almost dry, turn it over to finish drying.

Once dry, you can enjoy using your quilt or display it. To store it, put it in an old cotton pillowcase. Don't store it in a plastic bag or tub. Avoid having it touch wood shelves, as wood has acid. If you want to display it on a shelf, lay the folded quilt on top of a cotton pillowcase or old sheet.