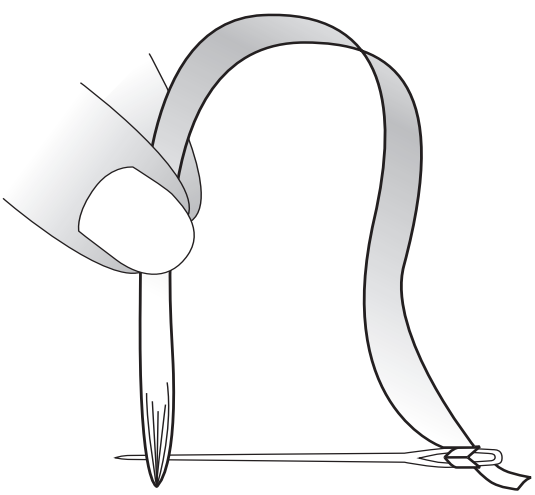
Stitching and design techniques

Laying out the stitch

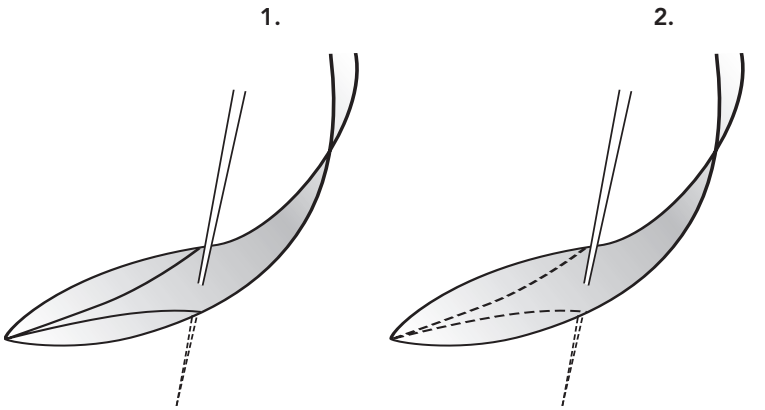
'Laying out the stitch' refers to the use of the chenille needle to manipulate the ribbon to keep it as flat as possible during the formation of ribbon stitch. This ensures the ribbon lies at its maximum width at the centre of each stitch. The needle shaft is narrower than the width of the ribbon, thus when the ribbon is drawn through the fabric it will be reduced in width and there will be folds at the edges. Use the shaft of the needle to encourage these folds to be as short as possible and to lie



Using the needle to encourage the ribbon to lie flat.

underneath the ribbon when the stitch is completed. If the folds are facing up when the ribbon is pulled through the fabric, twist and turn the ribbon over, then use the needle shaft to gently lay the ribbon in place before piercing the middle of the ribbon to complete the stitch.

Note The ribbon can only be manipulated before the needle point pierces the ribbon to complete the stitch.



The folds in the ribbon, if any, should be on the underside, as shown in 2.

Order of work

In some instances the order in which you do the work in an embroidery is very important to reduce the risk of pulling existing stitches, or to create a dimensional appearance, or both.

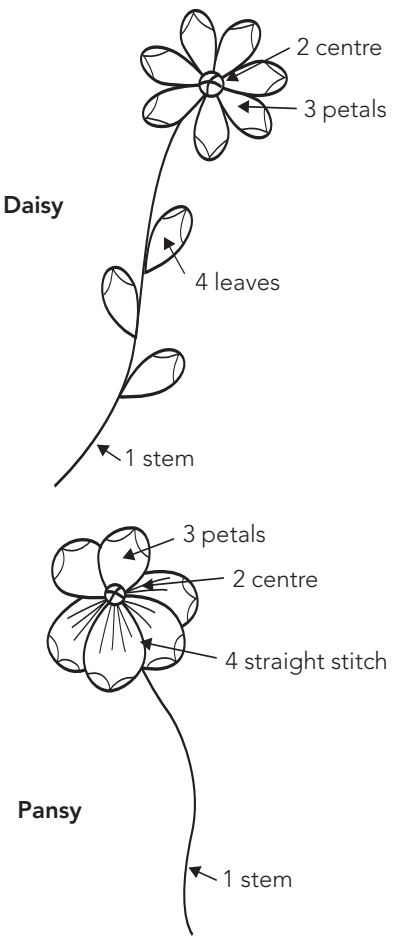
For the daisy shown in this diagram, the order of work would be as follows: stem, flower centre, flower petals, leaves. By working the centre of the flower before the petals the risk of pulling the ribbon stitch petals is eliminated.

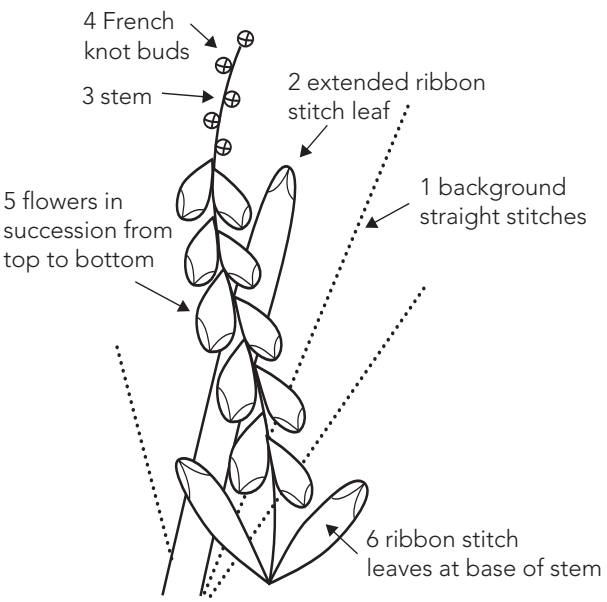
For the pansy, the stem is worked first, the centre second, the petals third, and the straight stitches of the pansy's face last, as once again this reduces the risk of pulling the ribbon stitches.

The straight stitches are worked from the outside of the petal towards the centre of the flower, as once again this reduces the risk of pulling these stitches.

Layering the flowers in the salvia spike is a commonsense approach based on the diagram you are following and isolating which flowers will need to be worked first. Work the stem first, the French knots next and the ribbon stitch last as the most economical way to complete this flower. The grasses and extended ribbon stitch behind the salvia spike should be completed before beginning the salvia spike.

Note In the project instructions the flower components are listed in the order in which they are to be worked.

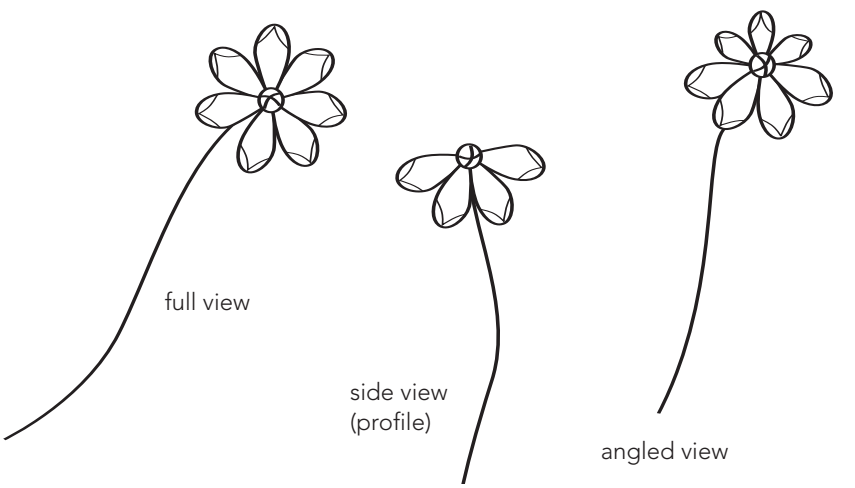




Salvia spike

Perspective stitching

Once you have mastered the basic stitches for ribbon embroidery it is a very simple matter to adjust the position and length of these stitches to create many varied and interesting looks for the flowers you embroider. By changing the position of the flower centre and by varying the length and position of the stitches that form the petals, a flower can be made to look as if



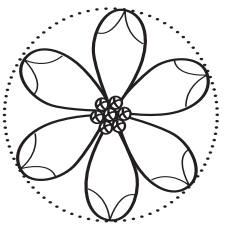
it is on its side and we are looking at a profile view, or from a different angle. This type of stitching is important in creating realistic effects in landscape or garden embroideries.

Note Any detail stitching on the flower petals with stranded thread will need to follow the ribbon stitches so that the detail stitches do not disturb the perspective created.

Scale: increasing and decreasing

Sometimes a flower or a leaf needs to be made larger or smaller for design reasons. But simply to make a ribbon stitch longer to increase the size of a daisy, for example, is going to compromise the scale of the flower so that it appears 'wrong' in the overall design. If a design element needs to be increased or decreased in size, the width of the ribbon you are using should be adjusted as well. This diagram shows the same flower design as it appears in different ribbon widths.

4 mm ribbon



7 mm ribbon

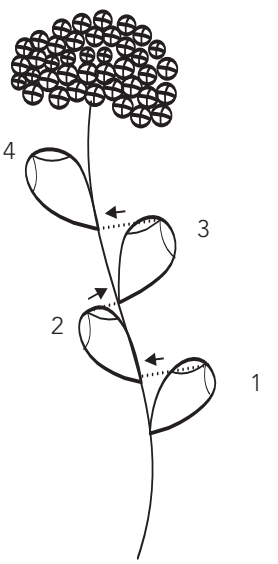
Economical use of silk ribbon

Silk is an expensive fibre, some say the queen of fibres, so you need to develop techniques which ensure that your ribbons are used in the most economical way so that your collection goes further and allows you to work more projects.

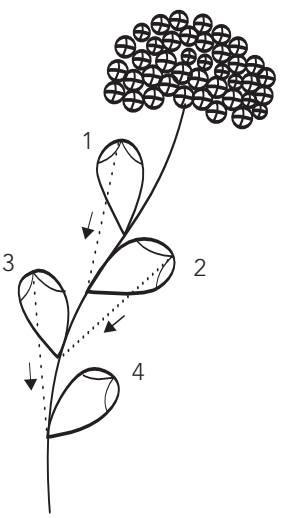
Leaving every working piece of silk ribbon attached to a

needle until it is completely used up will ensure that there is no wastage of ribbon (see notes under Pin/Needle Cushion).

Working ribbon embroidery stitches, particularly ribbon stitch itself, in a certain order can make an enormous difference to the amount of ribbon which is visible as stitches on the front of the work and the amount of ribbon 'wasted' in jumping from one stitch to the next at the back of the work. Sensible stitching regimes can achieve this with minimal waste. Illustrated here are two flower design diagrams which show the position of the stitches on the front of the fabric and show as a dotted line the path of the ribbon at the rear of the fabric from one stitch to the next. The first diagram illustrates the most economical path to use as the leaves are embroidered, moving upwards from leaf 1 to leaf 4. The second diagram shows the extra ribbon used when the stitches are started at the other end of the stem. Always consider the most economical stitching path before you commence your embroidery.



economical use of ribbon



wasteful use of ribbon

To jump or not to jump

A commonsense approach is required when deciding whether to jump across the back of the work to the next flower or stitch which requires the ribbon or thread you are currently using. Ask yourself these questions:

1 Will the stranded thread or ribbon be visible through the fabric from the front of the work? If shadowing will occur, do not carry the thread or ribbon but finish off and start again.

2 Will you use more ribbon by finishing off and starting again or will it be more economical to jump a short distance to the next flower or stitch? Always work as economically as possible.

3 Is there any danger of the ribbon strung across the back of the work being accidentally caught as you stitch? Keeping the back of your work neat means there is less likelihood of pulling existing stitches.

4 What is the ultimate use of the item? Large loops at the back of the work are a recipe for disaster on a heavy wear item.

Keep these points in mind as you stitch and jump to achieve neat, tidy and economical stitching.

Perfect petal placement

Achieving evenly spaced petals every time on simple flowers such as daisies and forget-me-nots comes with practice, but until that skill is acquired keeping a few simple techniques in mind as you stitch will make it easier.

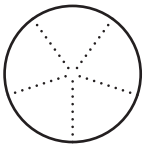
Using a water-erasable pen, draw a line on the fabric to represent the middle of each petal. If the petal is to be worked with a simple ribbon stitch this mark needs only to be a straight line to represent the length and position of the stitch required.

To get all the petals the same length, try drawing a circle around the flower centre using a coin or a clear plastic circle of the required size as a template. Mark the flower centre in the middle. Lay down ribbon stitches of even length around the flower centre, extending to the circle drawn on the fabric. Providing the flower centre is in the middle of the circle all the petals will be the same length.

petals of even length

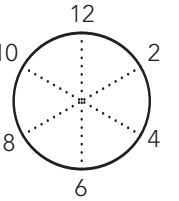
This same technique can be used when embroidering flowers with perspective—simply offset the flower centre and work petals to the circle edge.

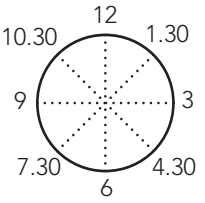
flower with offset centre,
uneven length petals



Flowers with five petals Mark the fabric with a Y, then draw in two more lines to complete the five evenly spaced spokes.

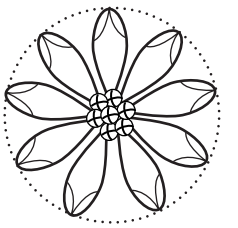
Flowers with six evenly spaced petals Mark the fabric with three intersecting fine lines—from 12 o'clock to 6 o'clock, from 2 o'clock to 8 o'clock, and from 4 o'clock to 10 o'clock.



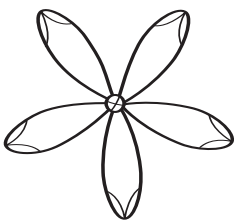


Flowers with eight evenly spaced petals Mark the fabric with four intersecting fine lines—from 12 o'clock to 6 o'clock, from 1.30 to 7.30, from 3 o'clock to 9 o'clock, and from 4.30 to 10.30.

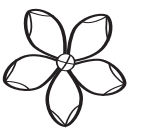
If more petals than eight are required, generally the flower centre will be created using more than one French knot, most likely a cluster, and the width of the ribbon will determine the number of petals. Simply work the flower petals as evenly as possible, spacing them by eye as you go.



Note The fewer petals a flower has the shorter the stitches need to be, otherwise the flower may start to resemble a propeller, as illustrated by this diagram.



propeller-like, unbalanced



balanced

Colour selection

Putting a working combination of colours together for a pleasing effect is often a confusing and difficult task for embroiderers who are just starting out with innovative and original designs. The use of colour is a very subjective matter,

and even colours which you do not necessarily like may need to be included in a design to give the embroidery integrity and balance. If you lack colour confidence or need a starting point, you may finds that one or more of the following ideas will give you assistance and encouragement.

1 Take a colour photograph of a small scene or a plant in your garden to base your design on. Alternatively, find a picture that appeals in a book or magazine and use that.

2 Embroider from nature—select plants from your garden or a friend's garden which are easily interpreted in silk ribbon embroidery and a combination of simple stitches.

3 Use garden, bulb or seed catalogues—these are a valuable resource for different plant types and in particular for the different colours that many plants display.

4 Find a fabric that appeals to you just because of its colours—ignore the pattern and the design and use the fabric's colour combination as a visual cue to help you select the ribbons to use in your own creative embroidery design.

5 Work safely—when you are starting out, stick to a limited palette; gradually, as your design skills increase, add more colours.

Note For a design to be realistic the following hint may prove helpful—always include a shade or tone of purple/mauve to give the design depth and mood, and shades of lemon/yellow to give it lightness and interest. The inclusion of just a small amount of these two colours will increase the realism of any multicoloured embroidery project.

Camouflage or waste stitch

This is one of the most useful stitching techniques to keep in mind as you work, particularly until you get a feel for the correct tension required for the various stitches and understand manipulation of the ribbon to get it to sit flat on the fabric.

A camouflage or waste stitch is required if you accidentally 'pull' the end of the ribbon stitch you are creating through to the back of the fabric. Because the formation of a ribbon stitch requires you to pull the ribbon back through itself it is almost impossible to undo—and it leaves a large hole in the ribbon if you do manage to undo it. Rather than cutting the stitch out, having to sew down the cut end near the previous stitch and re-knot your ribbon, it is easier to create a camouflage stitch to disguise the stitch that has been pulled. Simply tension the pulled stitch as much as possible to make the ribbon thinner, and work a perfectly formed ribbon stitch straight over the top of the tensioned one. This will cover the stitch, is less wasteful of ribbon and allows you to move quickly on to the next stitch.

Background techniques

Painted backgrounds

Painted cotton or silk backgrounds can increase the amount of perspective a piece displays. Simple one-colour backgrounds can increase the amount of depth and visual interest of any embroidery. These days, more often than not, I pre-paint a fabric before embroidering a design, even though it may not be a design for a 'garden landscape'. Painting the background is often listed an optional touch in embroidery instructions but it does give you an opportunity to create a sense of perspective before threading a needle. The technique works very well with flowers, foliage or shrubs, which all lend themselves to perspective stitching.

Below are a number of helpful hints which you should keep in mind when pre-painting fabric for embroidery.

1 If possible, always work on dry unwashed fabric.

2 Many fabrics are suitable to 'paint' but there are subtle differences between them. Cotton such as natural homespun is a personal favourite and probably the easiest to use.

3 Acrylic fabric paint is used to create the background for the designs. (If this is difficult to obtain you can use folk art paint mixed with a textile medium.) The four colours which I most often use include two shades of green, a foliage green and a darker green for highlights, a light cream and a deeper caramel colour, which is useful for paths and rockeries. I supplement this basic palette with a soft grey and a light blue when creating more complex designs.

4 If the item you are pre-painting is designed for use and will need washing, check whether the paint you are using needs to be ironed to 'set' it. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions.

5 Inexpensive bristle brushes are effective for applying the paint, as are small soft sea sponges.

6 Before application, always dilute the paint to the lightest shade you require. More paint can always be added to increase depth of colour, but paint is almost impossible to remove if applied too heavily in the first instance. A ratio of 1 part paint to 9 parts water (at the most 2 parts paint to 8 parts water) is recommended to start with. When this has been applied to the fabric, stronger highlights of the same colour or a darker shade can be added by applying a little more to the areas where it is required.

7 A scrap of the fabric you intend to use is always handy to have close at hand so that you can try the shade before applying it to the working fabric.

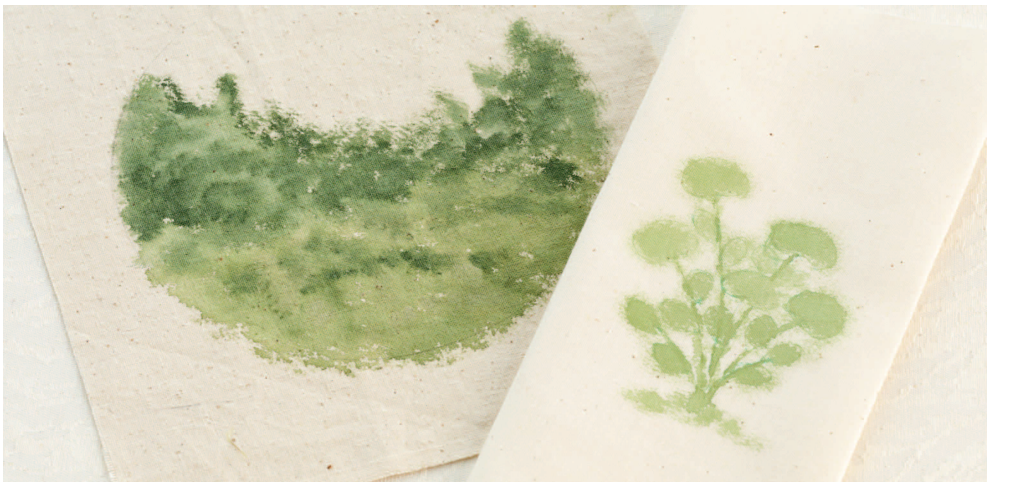
8 A hair-dryer is a handy tool during the painting process as it can be used to speed up the drying time, particularly between the application of different colours. It can also be useful to spot dry areas where too much water has been applied.

9 Always dry a completed area before applying another colour to minimise bleeding.

10 If you do happen to apply an area of colour in a deeper shade than you would have liked to begin with, don't try to remove it or water it down—you will just make a mess. Finish the remainder of the painted background and later on

you can embroider over the mistake to camouflage it. Chances are any small mistakes in the background can be covered with ribbon embroidery (it is very forgiving) and you will be the only one who knows. You can also disguise small areas where one colour has bled into another by strategically placing suitable flowers over the questionable spots.

11 Always keep in mind that you are simply creating a background to embroider over. The painted background does not need to be complicated or a dominant feature. It will become an integral part of the work but not the most important part—that should always be the hand embroidery.



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