

Part 4 The rigid heddle loom - Video 19

Some more about rigid heddle looms

These looms can be bought in a variety of widths and people often make the mistake of buying a very wide one, thinking it will 'do them for everything'. The truth is that wider ones can be unwieldy for a beginner and harder to warp, meaning you never actually get started.

Many hand weavers actually make things from narrow fabric, avoiding the need for a wider loom altogether. For instance, clothing can be made from narrower panels with shaping. Even accomplished weavers with a complicated 'floor loom' at home, often end up weaving more on a narrower loom, and often one with a rigid heddle. If you want to sell weaving, it is usually things with plain weave, texture and colour that sell best so again a rigid heddle loom is a good choice.

Which loom to buy?

A good buy is an Ashford (or similar) modern, rigid heddle loom with a 12inch/30cm – 24 inch/60cm weaving width. This can be either a folding or non folding loom and both are relatively compact and easy to store when not in use. Stands are available for most looms but this is optional, as the loom normally has notches that can be leant against a table or windowsill in order to weave. Ashford looms have particularly good notches, whereas some have pegs to catch onto the table, which are less effective.

Folding looms

It is also possible to buy a folding rigid heddle loom which has the advantage of folding in half and going into a bag. There is no need to buy the expensive purpose made bag as they fit nicely into a re-usable supermarket shopping bag. They are more compact and are called a Knitters' Loom because it is easy to take them to a knitting meeting or other get-together.

Non-folding looms are also relatively compact and either is reasonably portable. The decision is therefore one of cost as well as foldability, as the folding looms are more expensive and come ready varnished and assembled. Most others come as an easy to assemble, non varnished kit.

Some makes are twice the price of others but all contemporary looms from a reputable manufacturer work in the same way. There is no advantage in buying a more expensive make unless you happen to like it. The loom should come with some stick shuttles and normally a 7.5 dent heddle. This may vary somewhat depending on the make of loom.

With a 7.5 dent heddle, the loom will weave with 7.5 warp threads to the inch/2.5cms. A 7.5 dent and a 5 dent heddle are the most useful sizes for starting out with. A 5 dent heddle is a useful extra purchase and worth getting at the time you buy the loom to save on subsequent postage costs.

How the loom works

A rigid heddle loom offers versatility and really speeds up the weaving process compared to a frame loom. The 'rigid heddles' come in a variety of sizes as mentioned above. The heddle sizes range from about 12 dent to 2.5 dents per inch/2.5 cms, offering the ability to weave with different thicknesses of yarn and in different ways.

The rigid heddles

The heddle consists of a series of plastic strips with holes in them. In between each strip is a slot. Warp threads go through a hole and then a slot in turn. When the heddle is raised or lowered, one set of threads moves but not the other. This creates a 'shed' or gap for the shuttle to pass through, meaning a whole 'shot' or row of weaving can be done in one go.



Ashford folding rigid heddle loom, called the 'Knitters' Loom', showing a 5 dent heddle in use.

Planning a first sample

For a first project it is important to do something simple, narrow in width and using a thicker warp. A more widely spaced heddle such as the 5 dent and Aran weight yarn are ideal.

Even if you do not plan to use yarns that contain acrylic once you know the basics, an acrylic/wool mix yarn is the best to start with. It is forgiving, does not tend to break and makes it easy to get an even tension on the warp. As it is usually also cheap, it does not intimidate you into never getting started.

Get the correct yarn rather than trying to 'make do' and using something unsuitable, as it will be hard to work with and stop you from learning. An Aran weight/worsted/Australian 10ply yarn and 5 dent heddle, or double knitting weight/light worsted/Australian 8 ply yarn and 7.5 dent heddle wool/acrylic mix is fine.

Wannabe weavers who buy more expensive yarn to start with are often scared to try warping up the loom in case they ruin the yarn. So treat this first piece as a sample that you will not care about too much. Its main purpose is to teach you what to do.

There is a myth that you need to use a 'strong' warp for weaving. This is true of tapestry weaving but for most weaving you do not want a strong cotton warp, as the warp and weft are both going to show, either in the weaving itself or as a fringe. So for the warp, it is best to use yarns that are going to look nice but are also relatively smooth, at least when you first start to weave.

Use a narrow, short warp

A mistake beginners often make is to warp up with as long a warp as possible, using the full width of the loom. Often, someone has helped to warp the loom and that warp remains on there for many months or even years, because the potential weaver does not know how to warp the loom up again. The warp is 'saved' therefore, due to fears of spoiling it by having a go.

So what we are going to do is to put a short, narrow warp on the loom and use it up, giving lots of warping practise. This leads to confidence and more weaving and it is also a lot easier to thread the loom with a short warp.