Braided Rugs

Cooperative Extension, South Dakota State University

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Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
U. S. Department of Agriculture
Attractive braided rugs depend on the workmanship, their size and shape, the materials used, and color and design. Making a braided rug should be a way to express your individuality. You can be creative, and at the same time use old materials and develop craftsmanship.

The best braided rugs are soft underfoot and heavy enough to lie flat on the floor. Braids should be firm and strong, and sewed together with tight stitches that leave no open places between braids to catch toes or heels. The color and design should repeat and harmonize with those of the other furnishings in the room.

Contributing to good workmanship in making a rug are accuracy and carefully pressing the materials used in braiding.

**PLAN THE SIZE AND SHAPE**

Decide in advance where the rug is to be used. The size and shape must fit the space the rug is to occupy. Oval or rectangular shapes are usually more pleasing than square, round, or odd shapes. Pleasing proportions are the same as for other furnishings—widths and lengths in proportions of 2 to 3, 3 to 5, or 5 to 7. Floor space, or the size and shape of the furniture with which it is to be grouped will determine the best proportions.

A few large rugs seem to give a more restful appearance than many small scattered rugs. Small rugs may fit best in bathrooms, small hallways, doorways, etc. If the space in which the rug is to be used is irregular, the rug should fit the space regardless of shape.

**CHOOSING A COLOR AND DESIGN**

Choose color and design carefully. The floor is the foundation of the room and should have the appearance of stability. Colors that appear to “stay on the floor” are preferred. Dull, soft colors are best. You may need to dye some materials to get the best color scheme. Use commercial or vegetable dyes which are fast dyes. Choose one color to predominate. Usually a light center is more interesting than a dark one. A safe plan to follow is a medium light center area shading into a darker outer area. Two or three colors are easy to handle. If you use two colors, you could use 60% dominate color and 40% second color. If three colors are used, the proportion might be 50% of the dominate color, 35% of the second, and 15% of the third. To help get the appearance of flatness, repeat one strand of the same color in every braid. The color may vary from light to dark.

The design should conform in size and shape to the rug and should give unity to the whole. Scattered unconnected motifs give a spotty, unpleasant effect. Remember that the color and design of the braided rug should harmonize with the furnishing in the room where the rug is being used. Adding unrelated scatter rugs can ruin the appearance of a lovely room.

**SELECTING MATERIALS**

All materials used in one rug should be similar in texture, weight, and fiber. Hosiery, knit underwear, wool coats, dresses, neckties, draperies, blankets and yarns (wool or cotton) may be used. Rayon and silk are more suitable for chair mats than rugs. Wool is the most suitable material for rugs. It is pliable, does not soil easily, retains its beautiful colors, lies flat on the floor, and is easy to sew.

About one pound of medium-weight wool material is needed for each square foot of rug. Three square yards of medium-weight wool weighs about one pound. All material should be clean, shrunk, and pressed before being braided.

**BRAIDING THE RUG**

Three-strand braiding is most commonly used for rugs. However, any number of strands may be used. An odd number of strands (5, 7, 9, etc.) will result in a braid of uniform edges.

The width of a finished three-strand braid should not be more than one inch. Braids ½ or ¾ inch wide
will result in a rug of better quality than if wider braids are used.

Make a small sample rug before undertaking a large one. Rework many times to learn how to do even, firm work. Get used to the feel of the material.

**Cutting the Material**

Materials used for braids should be cut or torn on the grain. Cut or tear lengthwise or crosswise. New material cut on the crosswise seems to braid better. Some materials do not tear well. The tearing leaves frayed or puckered edges.

Cut heavy-weight materials into strips less than 2 inches wide; and medium weight 2½ inches wide. Light weight may be cut as wide as 6 inches. Strips from 1 yard to 1½ yards long are easiest to handle when braiding. Join short strips on the diagonal (fig. 1). Backstitch both ends of the seam.

**Folding Strands**

Strands of heavy or medium weight material are first folded with the two cut edges together in the center (fig. 2a). Next the strands are folded again so the creases of the first fold coincide (fig. 2b).

This folds all raw edges inside. Make strips over 2½ inches wide into a tube of 5 or more thicknesses (fig. 3).

![Figure 3. The fold for lightweight material.](image)

To help make even folds stitch 2 or 3 long darning needles (unthreaded) into an ironing board cover to form slots through which the material is pulled while it is being folded and pressed. Take two stitches in the ironing board with each needle. The distance between the stitches should be more than one-half the width of the strip to be folded (fig. 4a). Distance between the needles should be 2 to 3 inches. The second fold is made in the same way—slightly more than one-half the width of the first series (fig. 4b). Press both folds as the material is pulled through the slots formed by the needles.

![Figure 4. One method of making accurate folds in strips for braiding.](image)

Even folds are essential for a rug which will look the same on both sides.

Extremely heavy coating or blanket ends may be folded only once; usually the edges of this material do not ravel easily. Wiry material which will not hold a press may be basted together.

Some rug makers stitch together, either by hand or machine, the folded edges. Use a heavy duty or mercerized thread in matching color. When this is done the finished rug is firm and hard. Machine stitching is firmer than hand stitching. This works well for a rug which will get hard use.
Folded strips will be convenient if laid parallel over a coat hanger or peg. If large quantities are cut and pressed at one time, they may be wrapped around a cardboard. Sew together during the braiding process.

**Braiding**

As the braiding progresses, never allow two strands to end at the same place in the braid. Join a new strand when within 3 or 4 inches of the end of another strand. The piecing should be made where it will be crossed by another strand. Open the folds in the two strands, join on a diagonal (true bias). Finger press the seam open. Fold and continue to braid.

There are different ways to start the braid. Here is one way:

Start with two of the folded strips sewed together (fig. 5a). Be sure to insert one strip between the folds of the other strand, at a point not the center of the strand. This will avoid having to piece more than one strand at the same place in the braid. Attach to some stationary object (ironing board, under pressure foot of sewing machine). Continue braiding as shown in (fig. 5b, c, d).

To make the braid even and flat, keep folding the outside strand around rather than fold it back on itself (fig. 6). If you pull the strand around rather than fold it back on itself, the braid will be rounding instead of flat. Keep the braid firm but not tight while working on it.

**Length of Center Braid**

The first braid made is the center braid and should be as long as the difference between the finished length and finished width of the rug. For example, if your rug is to be 5 feet by 7 feet, the center braid should be 2 feet long. While sewing the first 2 or 3 rows around the center braid, check the length of the center braid. Tight sewing may shorten it, and you may need to adjust your sewing tension so that the center braid remains the length you want it.

**Sewing Braids Together**

Sew with a blind stitch or slip stitch so the stitches will be invisible; the rug will then be reversible (fig. 7 and 8). Sew and braid short stretches, alternately, in order to fit braids together without cupping.

Use double strands of strong linen carpet thread or wax double strands of heavy cotton thread (Size 8) to keep it from fraying. Stitch close enough around the ends to be covered by the next row.
Figure 8. Sew braids together with a slip stitch.

so no holes appear between braids, and tight enough to be firm without cupping. Every few inches anchor your stitching with a backstitch, so there will be no long threads which, if caught, might pull or gather. Beeswax used on thread helps strengthen it and keeps it from knotting.

Use a gathering thread to ease the braid around corners. This helps keep the rug flat (fig. 9). Another way is to pull the inner strand a little at the turn and stretch the outer one.

Figure 9. Ease braid around corner with a gathering stitch.

When using flat braids for square corners, the last strand to reach the point of turning should be brought directly back, over, and under the other strands so that it is parallel with itself (fig. 10). Repeat for each strand.

Finishing Ends

There are two methods for finishing ends of braids. One, the spiral method, is satisfactory for 3 strand braids. The entire rug is one continuous braid. End the braid at the curved end of the rug.

Ravel the braid 3 or 4 inches back of where tapering is to begin. Fasten strips with pins. Each unbraided strand should be about 3 feet long. Open folds of strand and cut each strand along the raw edges to a long tapered point. Refold strand. Braid to within 2 inches of end. Conceal the unbraided ends one at a time under the strands of the outer full size braid (fig. 11). Tack hidden ends securely.

The second method for finishing ends of braids is the ring method. A handsome rug results if each series of colors of braid becomes a complete circle or rectangle around the center. A more definite pattern results. To make these rings or circles, begin with an open end braid.

Figure 10. Turning corner. Strand of white turns back parallel with itself.

Figure 11. Taper braid.
Pin both the beginning and end of the braid so that will not unbraided more than wanted. Cut the ends of each strand, which should overlap about 2 inches, to gradual points. Interlace by tucking strand end A alongside strand 1, B along 2, and C along 3 (fig. 12).

Join each braid so it comes at a different place in the round. All braids should run in the same direction in the rug, and with the same side up. Pin braid to rug with safety pins. This temporary fastening insures proper fit of rings and adjustment of tension while you sew the ring in place.

**MULTISTRAND BRAIDS**

If braids of more than 3 strands are used an odd number should be used. The method for braiding and joining all odd number strands is the same. The illustrations show 5 strands.

Start with two strands two to three yards long. A third strand will be shorter. The two long strands are folded near the center, thus giving 5 strands. Braid, following steps in (fig. 13).

Figure 14 shows the two methods of finishing ends.
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