

Fabulous, Fun Felted Beads

by Susan Guagliumi



Materials

Scraps of felted wool fabric
Circle cutters in 3 sizes, fashioned from 3/8", 1/2",
5/8" diameter galvanized pipe
Dremel tool/drill fitted with grinder bit
Hard wooden work surface and hammer
Heavy thread (silimide or buttonhole twist) and sewing
needle

Cutting Circles

None of the punches or circle cutters I bought at the big box craft stores could handle the thickness of the felt. Either the fabric wouldn't squeeze between the jaws of the punches or the blades on the circle cutters were too short. Scissors would be a slow option so I decided to make my own punches.

I purchased 12" lengths of galvanized pipe at Lowes and had them cut each one in half. Then I used the grinder on my Dremel tool to sharpen one end. If you have access to a grinding wheel you can quickly do the initial thinning of the edge with that, but you will probably still need to use a finer grinding tool to sharpen and polish the edge.

I also used the Dremel to re-sharpen the punches when they dulled and required more effort to cut through the fabric.



Cutting the circles is easy: Just place a single thickness of the fabric on top of a hard, wooden surface and use the hammer to give the punch (sharpened pipe) a couple of good whacks. The two smaller sizes usually cut right away – and stack up inside the pipe (use a chopstick to poke them all out later), The 5/8" size punch may require 5-6 good whacks to cut each disk.

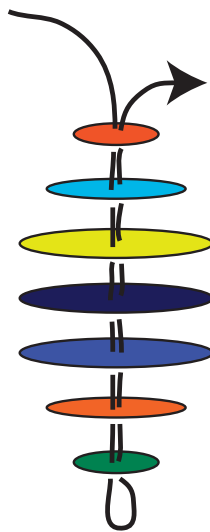
Originally, I tried using a silicone cutting mat under the fabric, but it was too soft and just compressed under each whack – not allowing the punch to cut through the fabric. Likewise when I used a soft pine board. I finally ended up using some pieces of MDF board (a hard, composite material that can be quite messy as the surface disintegrates as you pound on it) and some leftover pieces of hardwood flooring. I think a metal plate would dull the punches too quickly.

I work with lots of wools when I knit and always save my swatches, many of which I felted for this project. I also purchased some felted wool fabrics from Gini Woodward. You can contact her for pricing and availability at: gwoodward@giniknits-etc.com.



Making the Beads

To make these round beads, I stacked up one 3/8" disc, one 1/2" disc, three 5/8" discs, one 1/2" disc and one more 3/8" disc. I threaded the needle with a double strand of thread, sewed down through the stack of discs and then back up so that I could tightly tie the two ends together to compress the stack into a ball shape. Knot securely and clip the threads close. Most of the color combinations were random and even some of the strangest combos looked great when the beads were re-felted.



I put all the assembled beads into a bowl and poured boiling water over them to open the fibers. Then I put them in a mesh laundry bag and ran them through the washing machine for a hot wash/cold rinse with a load of jeans. By the time the beads were finished off in a good hot dryer, the layers were nicely felted together and their shapes even rounder. This second felting really finishes the beads and creates a much more even, closed surface. In the photo below, the beads on the right have not been re-felted yet.



You can string the felted beads alone or in combination with other beads for a chunky, light weight accessory. I love the way they look strung with some hollow, Indian silver beads. I think that individual felted beads will make great buttons and I plan to try some soon.



I used some of my extra 3/8" and 1/2" discs to make little people. I used a flat bead and a seed bead at the end of each arm or leg so I could re-insert the needle and work back through each section to the next. Fimo faces complete the effect. I sewed findings to the backs to make pins for the little girls on my holiday gift list. I think that they would also make great tree ornaments.

