

INTRODUCTION TO NEEDLE FELTING

Felting is a process when loose wool fibers intertwist and you get a firm material called felt. There are 2 types of felting: wet and needle. In this guide I'll describe the needle felting process.

Felting needles

The main tool for needle felting is a felting needle. It has 3 or 4 blades and some tiny barbs on them. There are two main characteristics of a felting needle: its gauge (thickness) and its form.

The most common **gauges** are #38 (medium, used for the whole process) and #40 or #42 (thin, used for smoothing the felted surface and for tender merino wool).

The most common **forms** are:

- triangle (most common, 3 blades),
- star (with 4 blades),
- spiral or twisted (usually triangular),
- reverse (usually triangular).

Star and spiral felting needles have a specific shape, which makes the felting process quicker.

Reverse felting needles pull out the fibers instead of pushing them inside. These needles are used when you want to make the felted surface look fuzzy - mostly for felted animals.

Felting needles can be used with or without a **holder**. There are needle holders for 1 needle and for several needles. Alternatively, you can tie two or three needles together with an elastic band.

Felting mats

For most felting projects you need a felting mat. There are different types of felting mats: foams, felting brushes, felted wool mats, burlap bags with rice. I even saw people felting on a stuffed toy.

To try your hand at needle felting you can use simple dishwashing sponges. I use high density foam blocks (they last much longer than household sponges) and a Clover felting brush (they last forever).

Finger protectors

They are usually made of rubber or leather. Not a must-have, but it's good to have some protection for your fingers as the needles are very sharp. Please note that finger protectors are soft and you can still pick your fingers, so be very attentive during felting.

Wire and wooden (bamboo) skewers

Not a must-have, but they are needed for many projects. For armature (when you create animals or people) you can use chenille stems or **wire**, covered with floral tape (intermediate and advanced level).

Skewers will help you roll your wool tightly. The better you roll the wool, the less effort you need to felt a sturdy form.

Felting wool

There 2 main styles of felting wool: carded wool and wool in tops (often called wool roving).

Carded wool is wool batting, with mixed fibers. Usually it's quite coarse and it can be core (undyed) or dyed wool. Core wool is cheaper and it's used as a base for big projects, then it's covered with dyed wool. Also it's used for stuffing.

Most common carded wool is bergschaf and corriedale, though merino wool can also be carded.

Wool in tops is brushed wool, it has long straight fibers. Most common wool in tops is merino (expensive) and corriedale (cheaper). Merino wool can be incredibly thin (14-19 microns) and a bit thicker (24 microns), but this type of wool is always very soft. Corriedale wool comes from New Zealand and it's usually 27 microns.

Both carded and wool in tops can be used for felting. None of them is better, they just serve different purposes. Generally, in needle felting carded wool is mostly used for 3D felting and tops are used for wool fairies.

Other wools and fibers

For needle felting you may also want to try viscose (for dolls hair), silk (usually mixed with merino) and natural curls (wensleydale, teeswater, leicester longwool etc.)

NEEDLE FELTING TIPS

1. Your main working tool is a felting needle, so try to buy good quality needles. I prefer European needles, but they are not easy to find. There are so many bad quality felting needles from China, so take care to check the needle's origin before you buy them. Bad felting needles are dull and very fragile.
2. Well, let's be frank: all felting needles are fragile, but good quality needles are much more durable. Always keep your needle straight to avoid breaking. Pull out the needle at the same angle it was inserted, never bend it.
3. Use skewers to roll your wool tightly. The more air you press out of the wool, the quicker you'll felt it.
4. Felt your wool well. You want to have sturdy forms, but not hard. However, if you plan to attach decor or other parts to a felted form, leave it still soft and felt the whole thing sturdy when it's done.
5. Always add thin layers of wool and felt it well. Thick layers are hard to felt through. Besides, you can always add more wool if needed, but it's hard to remove it if you've added too much.
6. Felt evenly. When you felt a 3D form, turn and roll it, so that all sides are felted evenly. Using several needles on earlier stages may speed up the process.
7. Don't stab deeply. On earlier stages you need only the working part of the needle to go into the wool. On finishing stages felt with the tip of your needle. If the needle doesn't poke the wool easily, change it for a thinner needle (or take 1 instead of 2). Never force it!
8. Use armature for the animal's limbs. I recommend cotton pipe cleaners.
9. Enjoy the process! Allow yourself to learn slowly and make mistakes. **Practice makes the master.**