

I recently received a phone call from a resident asking me how to store heirloom textiles. In her case, she was getting ready to pass down a bed cover that dated back her family from the 1800's. She wanted to make sure that the quality and construction of the coverlet was preserved for future generations. Other examples of textile heirlooms would include hand embroidered linens, needlework, handmade clothing, hankies and the like. Textile keepsakes such as this one are a visual illustration of family history, strengthen cultural ties, and help us remember the special events and members in our family. Heirlooms add richness to our lives. It is important to recognize that textile heirlooms require special care and attention. Whether you are trying to store great-great grandma's quilt or a distant uncle's hand-embroidered handkerchief, there are a few simple steps you can take to prolong the life of the article and preserve the history it represents.

First, make sure the textile item is clean. The longer soil remains on the fabric, the more challenging it will be to remove it. In the case of the coverlet mentioned above, it is important to consider the possible damage that could occur in cleaning it through traditional cleaning methods. If an heirloom item needs cleaned, I would encourage you to do more research with dry cleaners who offer textile preservation services. Some drycleaners offer a cleaning process that does not involve tumbling the item. This is an important consideration when preserving historic items such as the coverlet. Any time you take an item to a drycleaner, ask questions about the process they typically use on heirlooms and what dangers or risks are possible in using those processes on your treasured piece. After the cleaning process is completed, the business will usually place the item, wrapped with acid-free tissue between the folds, in a large acid-free box. The chemicals found in standard tissue paper and cardboard can damage the fibers of the item over time – especially if the item is made from cotton, linen, and rayon (cellulosic fibers.)

You can use a similar process at home for storing your heirloom textiles. If the item is clean, you can purchase acid free cardboard and acid free tissue paper to store your heirloom in. Although you will have to put some extra effort in finding these packing materials, they are available on the retail market. Acid-free heirloom storage boxes are often sold with a small amount of acid-free tissue paper as part of the package. Standard white tissue paper can be used only if it is replaced yearly to avoid the buildup of acid in cellulosic materials. If you use standard tissue paper, it is recommended that the item(s) be washed and thoroughly rinsed to remove any acid build-up.

Although the aging process will contribute to the deterioration of a textile heirloom, most of the other common factors that harm textiles can be controlled. These other

factors include exposure to light, abrasion, sealed environments, insects, soil and dust, high temperatures and humidity, insects, and rodents.

Light – Direct and indirect light, as well as artificial light, can affect the strength of the fibers in textiles. For this reason, a dark storage location works best.

High Temperatures – High temperatures, which are sometimes accompanied by excessively dry air, can make the fibers brittle. Storing heirloom textiles in an space where the temperature is not allowed to fluctuate will help maintain the quality of the item. Ideally, your heirlooms should be stored in a location where the temperatures are maintained within a range of 65-70°F.

High Humidity – Humidity above 55% can damage textiles due to mildew growth. Although these spores are in the air all the time, they only grow under high humidity conditions. Mildew can then stain the fabric and cause damage to the fibers. For this reason, basements are often a poor location for storing textile heirlooms. Areas in the home where high humidity and poor circulation are common should be avoided as storage locations.

Closed Environments - Air circulation is important to textile preservation. Sealing textiles in an airtight or nearly airtight environment may cause condensation or harmful fumes to form. Because plastic bags emit chemicals as they decompose over time, they should be avoided altogether. Instead of plastic bags, use a clean white sheet to allow air circulation.

Abrasion – Handle with care to avoid abrasion. If you need to repack the item, lay it out gently on a padded surface to protect it from snagging on sharp edges. Avoid wearing any jewelry when you are handling the item.

Soil – Wash and dry your hands thoroughly before handling the heirloom textile.

Insects – Keeping the storage area clean is your first line of protection. If you have your storage area sprayed with insecticide, make sure the spray does not come in contact with the fabric. Moth crystals can be used with some fabrics, but not all. Read the label on the moth crystals package and follow the directions for use carefully since the fumes are toxic to humans.

Rodents – Keep heirloom textiles away from a food source where mice are likely to be drawn to. Use snap traps for rodent control.

Final Suggestion – Heirloom textiles should be inspected every 4 to 6 months to prevent extended exposure to damage. Look for evidence of rodents around the storage area and look for dislodged fibers that may indicate an insect problem.

Special attention and care will limit the deterioration of your valued family heirlooms. If you need more information about caring for textiles, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!

Source: "Caring for Your Textile Heirlooms (FSC2-707)" by Marjorie M. Baker, Extension Associate for Clothing and Textiles of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.