

Cathedral Knits

finely crafted patterns for elegant hand knitting

Build a Better Garter Tab & Shawl Laura Barker



Garter tabs create a seamless construction for shawls that begin with a few stitches at the neck and then grow in three or more directions. Before garter tabs, often stitches for each half of the garter border were cast on individually, creating a small triangular gap in the border where each side pulled apart. The garter tab fills this gap beautifully, but the process can be fiddly. Traditionally, these tabs are worked by casting on the desired number of stitches for the garter border, often three. Next, by working an even number of garter stitch rows, creating the number of garter stitch bumps desired, one for each of the center shawl stitches. Once this short piece of work is finished, the stitch pickup begins. When the final row of the garter tab is worked, instead of turning over, the work is rotated a quarter turn, and the center shawl stitches are picked up from the garter bumps. Then, the work is rotated another quarter turn, and stitches for the garter border to be worked in the opposite direction (the same number you cast on), are picked up from the cast-on end. At this point, you are attempting to pick up stitches that go in a third directions on about one inch of straight needle. Add to that a potentially bulky cast-on, and it's no wonder that the last stitches are so difficult to pick up, and a little bumpy. While advocates of this method claim that any slight imperfections where you pick up the stitches will be too small to notice, why not aim for something better? Especially if easier too?

Changing the Cast-on: The first improvement to the standard garter tab will be to the cast-on. When you want to work stitches in opposite directions from the same cast-on, that calls for a provisional cast-on. For many years that struck fear in the hearts of most knitters until the remarkably clever Judy Becker invented her magic cast-on and published it in Knitty Spring 2006, <https://knitty.com/ISSUESpring06/FEATmagiccaston.html>. With slight adjustments, usually omitting one set-up row, Judy's Magic Cast-on works almost anywhere a provisional cast-on is required, as long as the first row after casting on is stockinette.

Judy Becker's magic cast-on for toe-up socks, from Knitty.com:

Work as follows:

Start with a 10" tail so you will have sufficient yarn to weave in this tail in invisibly. The tail will always be at the outside edge of your garter ridge. If not, there would be two knit rows or two purl rows adjacent somewhere.

1. In left hand, hold yarn as you would for a long-tail cast-on, but with tail above, around index finger and working yarn below, around thumb. Both needles are held in right hand, one above the other, with both points to the left. Slide yarn between forefinger and thumb over top needle. This will become the first stitch on top needle (*Figure 1*).

2. To make a new stitch on the bottom needle, first bring yarn tail on index finger behind both needles by moving needles and/or hand (*Figure 2*). Second, bring working yarn between needle points from front to back, and returning index finger and yarn tail to original position. (*Figure 3*)

3. To make a new stitch on the top needle, first bring working yarn on thumb behind bottom needle and up in front between two needles. This may be done by rotating needles points down, moving thumb up between needles, or some combination of both motions (*Figure 4*). Second, bring working yarn over the top of top needle and behind both needles and back to original thumb and working yarn position. (*Figure 5*)

Note that the working yarn below on the thumb is always used to create stitches on the top needle, and the yarn tail above on the index finger is always used to create stitches on the bottom needle.

5. Alternate steps 2 and 3 until you have 3 (or desired width of garter border) stitches on the top needle and the same number on the bottom.

6. Normally, we would rotate the needles like hands on a clock, but for garter stitch, we want to see the purl bumps on what is normally the WS. Taking care to keep the working yarn and yarn tail secure and keeping all stitches where they have been cast on, rotate needles from pointing at the left wall up to pointing at the ceiling, and keep moving until the

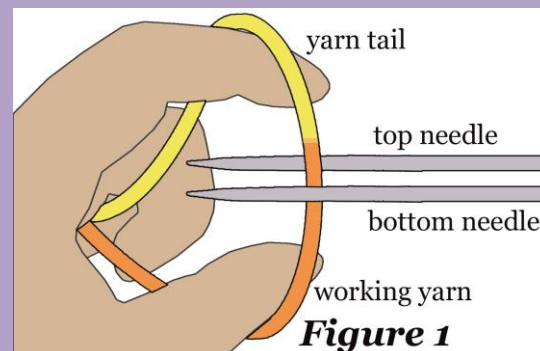


Figure 1

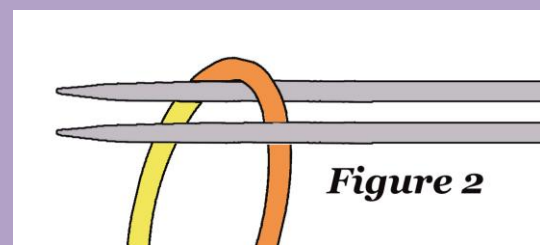


Figure 2

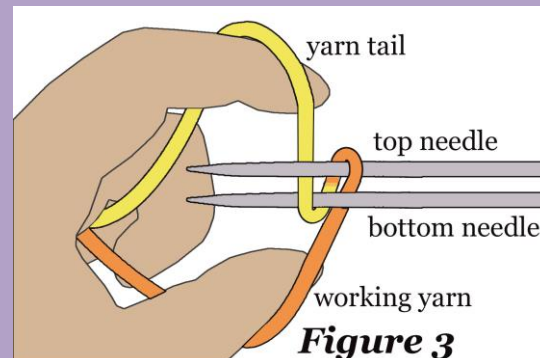


Figure 3

points are pointed at the right wall with purl bumps showing. The top needle is still on top.

With both needles pointing right, pull yarn tail to left, and working yarn down. When you bring working yarn up to work, make sure yarn tail is trapped. Carefully pull bottom needle through stitches until all bottom stitches are in center of cable. If you wish, you are ready to follow standard garter tab instructions; the only adjustment is that after picking up stitches along the garter bumps, you simply knit the provisional stitches on the cable rather than picking them up.

Changing the Body Stitch Pick-up and the Selvage: The second improvement to the standard garter tab will eliminate the need to cast on any body stitches. The body stitches will be increased on every WS row of your garter tab until you have the correct number. This eliminates the need to count rows, and has an additional benefit we'll discuss later. The selvage is not so much an improvement, but another option, creating a garter border with a smooth chain edge that matches a standard bind-off. *There is a trick to help you keep the RS and WS straight; the yarn tail is at the outside edge of your shawl. So, when the yarn tail is at the right edge, work a RS row. When it's at the left edge, work a WS row. As much as I would like to get the tail away from the outside edge, in order to have an uninterrupted garter stitch border, when you begin working full shawl rows, you need to be knitting into purl bumps at each, and that only happens with the yarn tail at the outside edge. I will give you some tips for sewing it in later.*

Row 1 (RS): Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1); turn.

Row 2 (WS): Pfb*, k2 (or width of garter border-1); turn. 1 st inc. **Since shawl body stitches are being created on WS rows, I create them as purls. Also these increases tend to stretch, so work them tightly.*

Repeat Rows 1 and 2 until desired number of shawl body stitches are created. *You don't need to count rows as you would for a traditional garter tab.*

Pull right needle through stitches just worked, sliding them onto cable with provisional stitches.

If you were working a standard garter tab, you would still need to work an additional RS row during which you picked up stitches, and then most patterns would follow with a WS setup row. These extra rows, while tiny, are not needed for width and sometimes create a small hump at the garter tab. You are already ready to start the first RS row of your pattern. If stitch markers were placed on a WS setup row, simply pin them in place, or, if using non-removable markers, slip one row, all stitches purlwise, placing markers as indicated. For this example:

Setup: Sl3p, (PM, sl1p) 3 times, PM, sl3p.

For a plain stockinette shawl with YO increases: *For garter stitch shawl, change all purls to knits.*

Row 1 (RS): Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), SM, yo, knit to next marker, yo, SM, k1 (or width of spine), SM, yo, knit to next marker, yo, SM, k3 (or width of border); turn. 4 sts inc.

Row 2 (WS): Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), SM, purl all, slipping markers until final marker, SM, k3 (or width of garter border); turn.

Repeat Rows 1 & 2 until ready to bind off.

Comparing the Traditional Garter Tab Shawl to the Provisional Cast-on:

- Cast-on bump is gone.
- Garter stitch is spaced more consistently across tab.
- First three body stitches are not worked up into shawl before the shaping begins.

- Chain selvage gives an option for your border, but you can see where we trapped the tail when casting on.

Eliminating the Cast-on Tail Trap:

- Find selvage stitch attached to tail.
- Gently pull leg of stitch attached to tail and pull up, releasing tail trap.
- Weave tail through adjacent selvage stitch with chain going opposite direction and pull to wrong side.
- Weave in tail.

Changing the Initial Body Increases to Spine-only to Match Body YO Increases

(Triangle Shawl): Again, this is a matter of preference, but it does give a very polished look. If the body of the shawl is stockinette with YO increases on each side of the spine and at the garter border, work as follows:

Row 1 (RS): Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1); turn.

Row 2 (WS): Pf&kb, k2 (or width of garter border-1); turn. 1 st inc.

If spine is wider than 1 stitch, repeat Rows 1 and 2 for each additional spine stitch.

Pull right needle through stitches just worked, sliding them onto cable with provisional stitches.

Row 3: Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), yo, k1, yo, k3 (or width of garter border) from cable; turn. 2 sts inc.

Row 4: Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), PM, p1, PM, p1 (or width of spine), PM, p1, PM, k3 (or width of garter border); turn.

Row 4 replaces the Setup Row for most patterns, and you are ready to begin the body.

For a plain stockinette shawl (same as before):

Row 5: Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), SM, yo, knit to next marker, yo, SM, k1 (or width of spine), SM, yo, knit to next marker, yo, SM, k3 (or width of garter border); turn. 4 sts inc.

Row 6: Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), SM, purl all, slipping markers until final marker, SM, k3 (or width of garter border); turn.

Repeat Rows 5 & 6 until ready to bind off.

Comparing the Spine-only Garter Tab Shawl to the Previous Shawl:

- The yarn overs make a perfect "T".
- The yarn overs in the corners are the bases of the side triangles.

Changing to a Spine-only Garter Tab for a Crescent Shawl: The shape of a crescent shawl is created by increases next to the garter tab only. There are single increases on WS rows, usually YO, and double increases on RS rows, often working 3 stitches into each YO. This means that the more stitches we create with our garter tab, the wider the gap between the two decorative increase holes will be, making this an ideal place to use a spine-only garter tab. Because the shawl shaping begins on a WS row, our first row of garter tab will be a WS row too. *For a garter stitch shawl, change all purls to knits.*

Row 1 (WS): Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1); turn.

Row 2 (RS): Kf&b*, k2 (or width of garter border-1). 1 st inc. *We are now creating center body stitch on RS row, so work increase as a knit.*

Pull right needle through stitches just worked, sliding them onto cable with provisional stitches.

Row 3: Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), PM, yo, p1 tbl, yo, PM, k3 (or width of garter border) from cable; turn. 2 sts inc.

Setup is complete, and you may begin working most crescent shawl patterns with YO increases.

For a plain stockinette shawl with YO increases:

Row 4: Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), SM, kyok (k, YO, k), knit until final st before marker, kyok, SM, k3 (or width of garter border); turn. 4 sts inc.

Row 5: Sl1p wyif, k2 (or width of garter border-1), SM, yo, purl to marker, yo, SM, k3 (or width of garter border) from cable; turn. 2 sts inc.

Repeat Rows 4 & 5 until ready to bind off. On final Row 5, omit the YOs.

Comparing the Spine-only Garter Tab Shawl to the Previous Shawl:

- The over-sized yarn overs are more consistent across the center of the shawl.
- The center stitch has a twist where we purled through the back loop to make it more uniform.
- Your shawl will always have two fewer body stitches in any given row than the pattern says. This is unlikely to cause a problem unless a design comes right up to the YO.
- If the design comes right up to the YO, try working Rows 4 & 5 before starting the pattern, giving you four extra stitches.