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## **Taming Threadzilla**

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Last year at this time I wrote about organizing my stash of unfinished projects. Although that activity gave me a great sense of accomplishment, I continued to be plagued by an unfinished task: organizing my threads. For months, I kept putting it off, dragging and dropping the entry in my electronic calendar from one month to the next, mostly because I wasn’t sure how to approach the problem. Finally, when I had to pull some threads for a small project this fall, I realized it was time to do something – a project less than 3” x 3” resulted in every thread drawer being open with all contents spilled over every surface in the room. At least it was my husband’s study that was trashed and not mine!

In October, I polled a few stitching friends about how they organized their threads. The suggestion that made the most sense to me came from Linda Elkow, who told me she uses ColorAid papers to sort thread by color. Inspired by Linda, I decided I’d do an experiment before making a commitment: I’d sort just my floss to see if it would work, and to determine how much effort it would involve. I’ll skip ahead to the finish at this point and tell you that it was a success! Along the way I learned a few things that might be useful to anyone else brave enough to try this at home.

### **Supplies used:**

- A set of ColorAid papers. If you don’t have them, they’re a great asset and relatively inexpensive. A full set of 314 colors in 2” x 3” cards only costs \$30 through [www.coloraid.com](http://www.coloraid.com). (They’re probably available in local art shops, too.) In general, they are a great asset for any stitcher.
- Plastic sheet covers usable in a 3-ring binder
- Dazor light with daylight bulb
- VeriPak 4” x 6” recloseable bags with hang hole. You can order these online at [VeriPak.com](http://VeriPak.com); they’re much cheaper than Floss-A-Way bags, they’re heavier, and the larger size means you can store many types and sizes of thread in them, not just floss.
- Loose-leaf rings – 1 ¼” and 2” diameter, available at office supply stores.
- A storage system – I used Iris 6-Drawer Mini Chests, also available at office supply stores.

### **Step one:**

First I sorted the 314 cards into the 12 hues: Yellow, Yellow-Orange, Orange, Orange-Red, Red, Red-Violet, Violet, Blue-Violet, Blue, Blue -Green, Green, Yellow- Green. This was simple, as the codes (Y, Y-O, O, etc.) are on the back of the cards.

Some hues come with auxiliary families, such as warm or cool versions, tints, tones, and shades. I sorted each hue into its subfamilies and fastened them onto an 8 ½” x 11” sheet of card stock (non-stick tape works fine). The color cards were laid out like shingles, so that each subfamily was grouped and overlapping. I then put each sheet in a clear plastic sleeve, eventually enabling storage in a 3-ring binder. A 13<sup>th</sup> sheet was used for the black/gray/white cards in the set.

## Step two:

I laid the 12 hue sheets out in two rows on a flat surface that was near a window *and* had a good source of overhead light. My layout looked like this:

Y	Y-O	O	O-R	R	R-V
Y-G	G	B-G	B	B-V	V

You'll recognize it as a "squished" color wheel. The point of this layout is 1) to have hues that are adjacent on the color wheel near each other so I could hold a thread and in one field of vision see the neighboring categories in which it might fit; and 2) to have enough lighting of different types to be able to distinguish between colors.

## Step three:

I opened my drawer full of floss and dug in. Each time I pulled out a skein, I placed it on the hue sheet I thought it best matched. Mismatches (except for threads having a very weak chroma) were generally obvious, since the nearby hues were within my field of vision and I could quickly determine which hue was the best match. In addition to the 12 hue categories, I created separate categories for black, gray, and white threads.

## Step four:

After I'd sorted all of my floss, I put all of the skeins for each hue into a large bag or box and quit work for the night. The next day, I began going through each bag individually, retesting each skein. Why do this? The first pass had been a quick and dirty sorting. Sometimes I ended up with a lot of skeins stacked on a card, and the cacophony of color changed my perception. Also, as I worked, I was educating my eye. 95% of the initial sorting was correct, but there were some skeins that leaped from one hue to another on this second round of sanity checks.

Another advantage of working the next day was that it was a different time of day with different lighting conditions. At the end of the second pass, I still had a few skeins (maybe 1% of the total) that were borderline and looked like they could fit equally well in two different hue families. All of these were skeins of very low chroma – all of which my husband would have called "beige". I stopped working and set things aside for the next day.

## Step five:

I brought out two additional tools: my DMC color card, and my Dazor lamp with the daylight bulb. By this time, my eye had been trained and the fresh look under different lighting helped me remove some still-ambiguous skeins. For the remaining 10 or so skeins, I looked up the color number on the DMC card to identify the color family.

To this point, the elapsed time for this exercise was four days, working at most 30 minutes per day. I could do it piecemeal – 5 or 10 minutes now and then. I discovered that it was a great training exercise for my eyes and color vision. The biggest problem was convincing my cats that they really didn't need to walk on the bed while all of the threads and ColorAid papers were laid out. Eventually we compromised, and each evening I collapsed the grid at one side to make sleeping room. Fortunately, they do not eat thread.

## Step six:

Feeling cocky, I pulled out all of my remaining threads of all types, and started to sort them in the same way. I'd had them in two Iris 6-Drawer Mini Chests – the ones with the black frames, translucent drawers, and wheels on the bottom – that are sold in office supply centers. It took me another three days, working in leisurely fashion, to sort the rest of my threads.

I then began to work with each hue category, realizing that simply stuffing each pile back into a drawer in the mini chests would be an inelegant finish to what to this point was an orderly process. I put wool skeins directly

on loose leaf rings, and the rest of the threads were each put into their own reclosable bag. These bags were then put on loose leaf rings, and the rings for each hue were put into a minichest drawer.

In addition to the 12 hue and black/white/gray categories, I created gold metallic and silver metallic categories. But what to do about variegated threads? Those of a single hue went with the appropriate color family; those that had multiple hues were put in a separate “overdyed and novelty” category.

### **Where do things stand now?**

My threads have been returned to their storage chest home. Each drawer has a label indicating the hue, and when I open the drawers, I have a sense of harmony and order that I never had in the past. Of course, when they go on sale again, I’ll purchase a third chest so the categories currently exiled in other places can join their compatriots in the Iris system.

Is this sorting strategy that would work for everyone? Probably not. When stitching, I tend to think first in terms of color. If you think in terms of texture, you may need a different organizing principle. My advice is to spend some time talking with others about their solution for thread sorting, and to determine what’s most important in your thinking when you start to pull threads for a project.

Once you make a decision about how to sort your threads, have some fun – try to predict in advance what categories will be most populated once the sorting is done. To my surprise, I discovered that I have more red threads than any other color. If you’re someone who buys threads “just because” and not for any particular project, having your stash sorted will help guide your purchasing impulses.

*About the author: Denise has served on the Board of the St. Louis Gateway Chapter ANG as Newsletter Editor, Program Director, and President. In 2002, she chaired the ANG Workshop By Mail program, and in 2003-2004 served as the ANG Director for Educational Services. She is a contributor to the 2002 ANG Chapter Handbook, and the 2003 and 2005 ANG Chapter Project Books. She welcomes your comments and questions at [denise@beusen.net](mailto:denise@beusen.net).*