Tips & Tricks with Interchangeable Needles
by Moira Ravenscroft

Choices, Choices ...
There are a number of interchangeable needle systems available to knitters today. These kits allow the user to interchange different needle tips onto a separate cable and offer some distinct advantages and options. The Boye Needlemaster Set and the Denise Interchangeable Needles have been available for many years and have a loyal following. Plymouth Yarns sells a bamboo set of needles called the Bamboo Sister Interchangeables and a similar set was also marketed by Webs until 2007. Knit Picks has two coordinating sets of interchangeable needles called “Options” and “Harmony” which provide both metal and laminated wood versions of needle tips which can be used separately or together on the same cables. More recently, Skacel has introduced an interchangeable kit based upon their Addi Turbo needles, called Addi Clicks.

These systems provide knitters with a compact and convenient way to carry and store a variety of needles. With conventional needles, you may need a multitude of needle formats in order to complete a range of projects. For example, you may need a set of short double pointed needles for a sock, or a pair of longer straight needles for a sweater or afghan project. Many knitters build up large collections of circular needles over time as they may require a short circular needle for a winter cap one year but a longer length needle for a Nordic sweater for the following season.

The interchangeable needle kits cut through a long list of different needles by providing needle tips in a variety of sizes and then a set of different lengths of cable to which they can be attached. This provides for a much more compact set of needles and will also represent quite a cost savings over time.

Carrying It With You.
At the start of a project you may want to carry multiple needles for swatching and adjusting your pattern. To that end each of the needle kits has a storage container available, some with a fixed case with a place for each item in the kit and some with plastic pockets which you can organize in your own way. However, most of the time you will only need a couple of needle tips, a cable lock, a spare cable, some end stops and a needle size gauge. Some of the needle manufacturers provide a separate plastic folder which is quite good for storing these items, but even better would be to find a colorful travel jewelry roll. These often come with a series of see-through pockets which are just perfect for this purpose and will enable you to take all the items for your current project in a very compact way.

The product review in this issue also has two cases that you can use for carrying your needles.

Multiple Projects? No Problem.
Most knitters have multiple projects on the go at the same time, often needing the same size needles that are already in use. With conventional needles you would need to laboriously transfer the stitches to a holder or alternatively buy a duplicate pair of needles when you wanted to start a new project.

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With the interchangeable needles this is much simpler. To start a new project, you simply unscrew the needle tips that you want and replace them with a pair of end stops to prevent the stitches escaping from the cable. Slip a size marker tag onto one end of the cable before attaching the end stop so that you know what size needle you were using and your needle tips are free to be attached to a new cord ready for your next project.

**No More Stitch Holders.**
A number of patterns require you to work a small section of your pattern ahead of time and then hold that on a stitch holder until it is needed, such as for a pocket which will be added later on. With interchangeable needles, the item can be worked in readiness and then left on a spare needle cord with end stops in place. Then when the piece is ready to be added, one needle tip can be put back on and the item incorporated into the main piece. You don’t even need to put a pair of tips on as you just need the needle tip to be at the “active” end of the cord.

**Straight Or Circular Needles In One Set.**
Although most people will automatically think of using these interchanges as a replacement for their circular needles, they can also be used in lieu of straight needles. Place one needle tip on the end of one cord and the second end onto another separate cable. Put an end stop onto the other end of each cable and you have the equivalent of a pair of straight needles.

**“For Best Results, Take Time To Check Your Gauge.”**
Ah, the bane of every knitting project: the gauge swatch. With standard needles, you would have to have three or four different needles on hand in order to work a successful swatch, first trying one and then another in an attempt to either match the pattern gauge or to test out a new yarn or stitch. However, with interchangeable needles, the work can remain on the same cable while you change needle tips up or down in size until you are happy with the result.

**Tramlines.**
Many beginning knitters get frustrated with their work when they see that their Stockinette stitch is uneven despite their best endeavors. The purl stitch uses fractionally more yarn than the knit in most styles of knitting and can lead to uneven knit and purl rows. With experience we can learn to work the purl stitches with a slightly tighter tension, but interchangeable needles can help get over this frustrating problem. If the “tramlines” seen on the back of the work are only minor, then simply having a wooden needle tip to work the knit stitches and a slicker, metal end to work the purls may be all that is required. Many knitters work just marginally tighter using metal needles and this might solve the problem. For more pronounced tension issues, then using a needle tip which is one or two sizes smaller for the wrong side rows will give lovely, even knitting.

**Textural Knitting.**
This same idea can be exploited for some interesting textural effects. If a large size needle tip, such as a US # 13 (9 mm), is placed on one end and a markedly smaller one, such as a US # 6 (4 mm) is on the other, then an interesting effect will result. Large right side rows will be interspersed by tighter wrong side rows.

**Two Socks On Two Circular Needles.**
There are many ways of working socks, such as with four or five double pointed needles or with one long circular needle using the “Magic Loop” technique. However, many knitters like working a pair of socks at the same time on two circular needles. In this method, you use one circular needle for half the round and then the other needle comes into play for the second part of the round. The Knit Picks needles come in two forms, with metal needle tips in their Options range and color laminated wooden ends in their Harmony set. Using one cord with metal ends and a second cord with the wooden needle tips will eliminate future confusion. The interchangeable needles do not go down to very small sizes, but for warm winter socks that don’t require such small needles, this might be a good technique to employ.

**Working With Sticky Yarns.**
Many of us have had the experience of trying to work lace patterns or dealing with sticky yarns that are difficult to get the needle into. Once again, interchangeable needles can help with this issue by putting the correct sized needle onto the “working” end of the cord, but using a smaller needle size at the other end. This has the effect of opening up the stitches as they present themselves for working and making it easier to work the k2tog’s or other manipulations we wish to work. I like to distinguish between these ends by using a wooden needle tip as the smaller size in my left hand and the correct sized metal needle in my right. The stitches are held ready for working on the less slippery wooden needle tip while the smooth right hand needle adds a turbo speed to the work. This works best when working circularly but it is possible to use this technique with straight knitting too by changing out the tips at the end of the row.

**TSA Alert.**
Knitters hate to be separated from their work, especially in planes or when visiting government buildings. If you like working with metal needles but you think that they might not be allowed, then you can elect to change the needle tips to wooden ends for the duration of your trip and then change back again when you get to the other end. As an extra precaution, you could put a pair of end stops on your cable and store the needle tips in a pencil case until you get through the security check. You will never have to sit fidgeting without any knitting to pass the time away again!
Rippit ... Rippit ...
You spot an error many rows further down in your work and you realize that you need to rip it out. Once again, interchangeable needles can help with this process. Putting a smaller needle tip on the end of the cable will speed up both the removal of the problem stitches and the process of recapturing the stitches required further down in the work. The smaller needle tip will quickly and easily slide into the stitches below the error and then when they are all secured back on the cable, the correct needle tip can be replaced and the work can recommence.

Safety Line.
Ripping back work can be made even easier with the insertion of a "Safety Line". This is especially useful in lace knitting where stitches can unravel easily below the line you are wanting to go back to and where the pattern row can be hard to determine.

With conventional needles, you would need to thread a thin slippery yarn or a piece of dental floss into a tapestry needle and insert the safety line through the current row on the knitting needles. However, if the interchangeable needles you are using have a small hole in them, as the Knit Picks ones have as part of the locking mechanism, then you can tie a thin thread into this at the start of the row. At the end of the row, untie it and leave it in place running through the active stitches in that row until you have safely gone beyond where it is needed any more. If you use ring-style stitch markers, then you would need to make sure the safety line does not pass through these, so just move them out of the way before you make the stitch and then replace them. As it is so easy to insert this cord, several can be left in as you work so that you have a choice of project rows at different points in your work to go back to should the need arise.

Increasing And Decreasing.
At the start of a project such as a shawl or a sweater, you may have relatively few stitches on your needle and will need only a short cable. However, as time goes on and the project grows you may need a longer length. With regular circular needles, you would need to have several different length needles all with the same size needle, but with the interchanges this is not a problem. Remove the left-hand needle tip from the short cable and replace it with an end stop. Now attach the needle to one end of a longer cord and put another end stop at the other end. For this row, you are essentially using two straight needles, one longer than the other. At the end of the row, remove the second needle tip from the old short cable and place it at the other end of the longer cable so that you can now work circularly again.

Maxi And Mini Needles.
Some of the interchangeable kits include a cable join. This allows a series of cables to be put together to make a super-long needle which would be especially useful when working really large projects such as a wallhanging, blankets or shawls. At the other end of the spectrum, most of the needle sets have a short cord available as part of the kit or as an extra item you can purchase. However, should you wish to shorten the cables still further, you can cut them with a craft knife and join them again with a good strong epoxy glue. Any roughness can then be gently sanded down to make the join seamless. This is especially useful for intricate work or for making 1-cord edgings.

Locking It In Place.
The chief concern of using interchangeable needles is that they might come apart while you are working and leave your work in your lap rather than attached to the cable where it is supposed to be. This can, of course, happen even with conventional circular needles when a needle breaks or the cord becomes weakened. However, the risks with the interchanges are a little bit greater as there are more joins which could come apart. The way to avoid this is to regularly check the joins as you work. When you come to the end of a row, just get into the habit of running your hand over the join and checking that it still feels smooth. Alternatively, if you feel a slight 'catch' as you are working, then the join is coming adrift and needs to be tightened up. To get this join good and tight, hold the tip with a small 3" X 2" piece of rubberized shelf-liner cut from a roll while locking the end into the cable.

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A rubberized thimble or a finger end cut from an old pair of household gloves would also work to get a tight grip on the slippery needle ends and avoid any accidents.

Options, Options ...
Despite all of the advantages I have outlined so far, I'm sure there will be times when most of us will want to use our conventional needles for a project, and it does take a strong will to donate all your old Addi Turbos to the charity shop! However, it is exciting to work with the interchangeable needles and to see the ways in which they have increased the range of options available to us in our work. I am sure they will be high on many knitters’ wish lists in the future.

References
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About The Author
Moira lives, knits, spins and drinks tea in the beautiful New England town of Carlisle, MA. She has been knitting since she was four and is still finding more to learn! She is a Master Knitter and was a member of the TKGA Master Hand Knitting Committee from 2006-2008.

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