A plain cotton sheet set at a department store might cost $25-$30. But add a line of decorative stitching along the turn-down edge, and it looks like the $99+ set that came out of a fancy catalog. Maybe you don't care for fancy sheets in catalogs – but the point is: a little decorative stitching adds a lot, and can take a sewing project from ordinary to "Did you really make that?!"

Just about every sewing machine, even the basic ones, have at least a few decorative stitches built in. Here's a look at the stitch chart of the 425 that come standard with the new Janome Horizon Memory Craft 12000.

With a few tips and a little practice, you can be using them like a pro! Nearly all the decorative stitches on the Memory Craft
**12000** can be sewn up to 9mm in width. Pretty!

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**Decorative vs. Embroidery**

First, a little nomenclature. Some people refer to decorative stitches as "embroidery stitches." While some of them do look like lines of hand embroidery, in the sewing machine world, "embroidery" always refers to the stitching done by an embroidery machine, using a special carriage and hoops. Decorative stitches are ones you can sew out just like a regular stitch.

As we mentioned above, top-of-the-line machines, like Janome's Horizon Memory Craft 12000, have hundreds of decorative stitches, including alphabets, vintage dress forms, even little hand bags and kitty cats. But you can sew them out just like you would a straight stitch. *(The MC12000 also lets you create your own custom decorative stitches from scratch, but don't get me started on that.)*
Preparing your fabric

Decorative stitches are generally wider and use more thread than simple utility stitches, so they have a greater chance of making your fabric pucker.

You can try stabilizing your fabric with spray starch. Follow the directions on the can. Then sew a test row of your stitching.

If spray starch isn't strong enough, try a tear-away stabilizer. Since you'll probably be sewing along a relatively narrow area, to conserve, you can cut the stabilizer sheet into strips and pin it in place. Again sew some test seams.

For expert help in getting the right stabilizer for your project, ask for a little advice at your sewing machine or fabric store.

Slow down a little

Your sewing needle is covering a lot of ground when you sew a decorative stitch. If you try to sew out an ornate stitch at top speed, the quality will suffer. So run your machine a little slower and be patient. You'll be much happier with the results.
Guidelines

It’s a good idea to use guidelines on your fabric. Decorative stitches don't sew straight - the needle often moves right, left and backwards as the machine creates each stitch, so it can be difficult to keep the stitches in a straight line. Following a guide line will help you to keep things straight. Using a clear ruler, decide exactly where you want your line of decorative stitching to appear and draw a line right on the fabric. Make sure you use a special fabric marking pen that easily erases or washes away.

Feet and tension adjustments

Your sewing machine may have come with a foot designed to do decorative stitching, such as a Satin Stitch foot. If you don't have one or aren't sure, ask your local sewing machine dealer about the decorative stitch foot that will work best with your machine.

Now... watch that foot! When sewing decorative stitches, don't watch the needle; watch the foot. As I said above, the needle will move around quite a bit as the machine makes the stitch. The presser foot is your best guide for the placement of the stitch - the center of the foot will indicate where the center of each stitch will be sewn. Janome's Satin Stitch foot has a little red arrow at the exact center, which makes it very easy to stay on track.

Because decorative stitches pull a little more on the fabric, you may need to lower your upper thread tension 1-2 notches. This will keep the bobbin thread from being pulled up to the top where it will show.

Decorative stitching for appliqué

One of the most popular uses for decorative stitches is appliqué. Nearly any machine that offers decorative stitches contains at least one you can use for this technique. These are simple stitches, which are used to hide the seam between the background fabric and the appliqué (while attaching the appliqué at the same time). A Herringone stitch, Blanket stitch and the classic Satin stitch are all great appliqué options. But, why not be creative and try a few other options? Look for a stitch with a wide swing side-to-side and test first on fabric scraps.
For more notes about decorative stitching for appliqué, as well as using it for ribbon embellishment and even scrapbooking and card making, check out our previous article: Decorative Stitches: Part Deux.

Creating a stitch sampler

It's one thing to look at the little graphic of a decorative stitch on your machine and quite another to see it stitched out with real thread on fabric. Create a little stitch sampler of your favorites to hang near your machine for easy reference. Check out the framed sample we created of some of our favorites. You could also display them in a wooden embroidery hoop or simply mount your finished sample on a piece of heavy cardboard.

If mounting in a hoop for frame, use a fabric marking pen to draw a circle or rectangle on your fabric larger than the hoop or frame. If doing a plain mount on cardboard, draw a rectangle of whatever size you'd like.

Using a clear ruler and the fabric marking pen, draw parallel lines, an inch or so apart, across the circle or rectangle you drew on the fabric

Starch or stabilize your fabric. Sew a different decorative stitch on each line. Using a variegated thread for this step produces a cool effect.
Start sewing a few inches from the closest edge of the circle/rectangle and continue sewing at least an inch beyond the far edge. This allows the sample to fill the hoop or rectangle.

When finished stitching, cut out the circle/rectangle and mount. For the cardboard option, wrap your fabric around to the back and glue in place to hide the raw edges.

Hang it near your sewing machine as a handy reference.

Again, our tutorial shows you the steps in more detail.

**Stitch combinations**

This sampler idea is also a great way to keep track of decorative stitch combinations you've built. What are those, you ask? Some machines can actually customize the repetition of decorative stitches. For example, the Memory Craft models in the Janome line can memorize stitch combinations, save them into a built-in memory bank in the machine, and sew them out on command: square, star, oval, feather, square, star, oval, feather, square, star, oval, feather... ad infinitum. This creates a super custom look for garments, pillows and more.

The number one most important technique for sewing successfully with decorative stitches is: *experimentation*. Take some scraps of fabric and play!