



MULTI-TALENTED The Bernina Activa 230PE excelled at sewing and quilting in our tests.

Sewing machines

Our tests of 18 models found seven standouts

SINGER, synonymous with sewing, leads in sales but not in our tests. Sewing machines from Brother, Bernina, and almost everyone else did better.

TV shows like "Project Runway" and "Trading Spaces" have introduced sewing to a generation that never took Home Ec. Brother makes official "Project Runway" sewing machines, including the \$400 Brother Innov-is 40, which was one of our top scorers. See Close Up for more details.

The Singer sewing machines we tested were easy to use and relatively inexpensive, but sewing performance was only fair to average, a drop from our tests in years past. Its \$950 embroidery machine was slow, and the software had glitches that could ruin a project.

Performance differences weren't all we found. Fuzzy pricing, warranty surprises, and service problems can make buying a machine harder than deciding which one to choose. Here are the details:

Shopping is a pain. Our online readers told us that shopping for a sewing ma-

chine is worse than looking for a used car. Major retailers set firm prices, but choices tend to be more limited and repairs can be a hassle. Dealers often make comparison shopping difficult by setting their own prices and not quoting prices over the

phone. On the plus side, many offer sewing lessons and service, and sell parts.

Warranties vary considerably. Of the 18 tested models, five needed one or more repairs, parts, or reprogramming. Warranties of most tested models ranged from three months to a year for parts and labor. But Euro-Pro makes you foot the bill for shipping. Even limited mechanical-defect warranties varied from 10 to 25 years.

How to choose

All models we tested can handle straight seams and zigzag stitches; many offer more than 100 stitches. Match the machine to the tasks you'll perform—basic repairs and alterations, frequent projects, or quilting and embroidering. Beginners and intermediates should consider buying a bit more machine than they need because their skills and interest might grow.

Mechanical or electronic? You'll have to set most of the controls by hand on mechanical models, and they have fewer stitches. But they're less expensive and fine for basic sewing. Many electronic sewing machines have touchpad controls and recommend the best stitch, settings, presser foot, and more, based on the material. Don't be intimidated. All of the electronic models in our tests were easy to use. Some have programmable memory, so you can save stitch and letter settings.

Embroidery machines combine sewing and embroidery functions. The machine holds a hoop under its needle and moves the hoop in four directions as the needle sews. You push a start button, watch, and change thread colors. You'll need a computer for access to all its capabilities. Some

▣ CLOSE UP

A 'Runway' model with star qualities

It's not every day that a sewing machine upstages a supermodel. But the consumer version of the Brother machine used on "Project Runway" turned heads in our test labs. On this popular TV show

hosted by supermodel Heidi Klum, aspiring fashion designers compete against one another. But the competition in our tests was even fiercer. We pitted the \$400 Innov-is 40 (shown) against machines costing up

to \$2,200.

The Innov-is 40 did a very good job on satin, medium-weight wool, sheer and stretchy fabrics, and buttonholes. It wasn't as adept at sewing through layers of denim or at quilting. Its stitch selector was very easy to use, and it also has an automatic needle threader, variable speed control, an on/off button, and thread cutters that minimize tangling. Now that's a supermodel.



machines are more intuitive to use than others, but there's still a learning curve.

Take a test drive. Independent dealers will usually let you try the machine in the store. So take a project with you or at least a few fabrics. If tryouts aren't allowed, ask about returns.

Never pay full price. Save by searching

for online coupons and asking about upcoming sales, trade-in allowances, and interest-free financing. Don't be shy about negotiating with dealers and asking for free sewing lessons.

Learn about repair polices. Many dealers offer in-store service. If not, they'll send you to a repair center or to the manu-

facturer. No matter who will do the repairs, ask about turnaround time, which can vary from days to weeks. Remember that repairs made by technicians who are not factory-authorized can void the manufacturer's warranty. And keep your machine's box and packaging, in case it needs to be shipped for repairs.

Overview

Spending more doesn't guarantee better performance, but being cheap usually isn't a good idea either. No machine does it all, so consider the projects you'll make and the fabrics you'll use.

CR Best Buy

These models offer the best combination of performance and price. All are recommended.

Recommended

These are high-performing models that stand out for the reasons below.

Best for beginners and tight budgets:

A2 Kenmore \$120 CR Best Buy

This mechanical machine handles heavy denim and sheers well, making it a good choice for mending and making curtains and other simple items. It's a bit short on features but is lightweight enough to carry to sewing class.

Best for intermediates:

A1 Pfaff \$800

B2 Brother \$400 CR Best Buy

A1 was the only mechanical machine that was very good at a sewing a wide range of fabrics, producing even stitches without puckering. It's also very good at making buttonholes and has more room to the right for bulky items, but it lacks an automatic needle threader. **B2** combines fine sewing performance with a very reasonable price for an electronic machine, but it balked a bit at sewing rolled denim seams.

Best for quilting and embroidering:

B1 Bernina \$1,350

B3 Janome \$1,500

B4 Janome \$900

C1 Bernina \$3,700

B1 is a great choice if you want one machine to handle all quilting and sewing needs. **B3** has even more room to the right, so it can accommodate larger quilts. Its presser feet are easy to change, and it has programmable memory. **B4** trades some sewing prowess for a lower price. **C1** is an embroidery machine that also excels at sewing. It is loaded with features and stitches, and once its embroidery software is mastered, it is very easy to use.



A2 Kenmore



C1 Bernina

Ratings Sewing machines

In performance order, within types. (Types designated A, B, etc.)

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Recommended	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results				Very good for			Features			
					Sewing performance	Ease of use	Knits	Sheers	Heavy fabrics	Buttonholes	Quilting	Top-loading bobbin	On/off button	Needle down	
		Similar models, listed in small type, are comparable to tested model.		0	100										
				P	I	F	I	G	I	V	G	I	E		

A MECHANICAL Tested models offer 13 to 37 stitches.

✓	1	Pfaff Select 3.0 Select 4.0	\$800	66	●	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Kenmore 15358	120	65	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	3	Brother XL2600i	150	62	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	4	Husqvarna Viking Emerald 118 Emerald 116	380	59	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	5	Brother Pacesetter PS 3700	400	44	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	6	Janome Magnolia 7312	160	41	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

B ELECTRONIC Tested models offer 30 to 160 stitches. Programmable models are footnoted.

✓	1	Bernina Activa 230PE	1,350	79	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Brother Innov-is 40 Project Runway Limited Edition Innov-is 80	400	79	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	Janome Memory Craft 6600P	1,500	79	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✓	4	Janome 6260 QC	900	72	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	5	Husqvarna Viking Sapphire 870Q <small>(2) 850Q</small>	2,200	65	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	6	Euro-Pro 6130A2	350	61	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	7	Singer Curvy 8763	350	61	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	8	Singer Advance 7422	180	60	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	9	Kenmore 16231	250	52	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

C EMBROIDERY/SEWING Tested models offer 100 to 460 stitches. Programmable models are footnoted.

✓	1	Bernina Aurora 440QE	3,700	89	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	2	Brother Innov-is Duetta 4500D	5,700	72	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	3	Singer Quantum Futura CE-250 <small>CE-150</small>	950	58	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

① Lacks an automatic needle threader. ② Has a programmable memory. ③ Lacks free-arm sewing.

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is sewing performance and ease of use. Models with a dot scored **very good** or better at the tasks in each category. **Top-loading bobbin** lets you see at a glance how much bobbin thread is left. **On/off button** turns the machine on or off, rather than using a the presser foot. **Needle down** lets you turn a sharp corner easily. **Price** is approximate retail.