

# How-To



## Organize “The Stash” With Sample Books *Elizabeth Hayes*

*Keeping track of what's in an out-of-control stash is easier than you think if you adopt a simple technique that's been around for hundreds of years.*

Most costumers have a fabric stash: closets and bins filled with scraps, samples, remnants, and miles of random fabric. As fun as it is to go treasure hunting through the pile, it's a wise idea to keep some sort of inventory. Keeping a sample book is a



Fabric stashes are so ubiquitous that there are even embroidery patterns that celebrate them, such as this one from [Embroidery Library](#).

superb option, especially for historical costumers.

You can bin, label, and stack fabric to keep it tidy, but you still have to rifle through storage tubs just to see if you have 5 yards of chartreuse taffeta. Computer databases offer ways to organize collections, but even with pictures, computers can't always capture the true nature of fabric, which is very tactile.



Swatch book, c. 1763-1764, Lyon France. Photo courtesy of the [Victorian and Albert Museum](#).

Long before computers, people relied on swatches and sample books to organize and buy fabric. Swatches are exceptionally useful since you can touch them and view the coloring in different lighting. Sample books began popping up in the 18th century when fabric weaving was becoming more commercial and really took off during the

Victorian era when the industrial revolution hit. Antique swatches were glued into books to be more permanent, making them great references for modern costumers.



Page from John Kelly manufacturer's swatch book. Worsted wool samples mounted on paper. Norwich, United Kingdom, 1763. Photo courtesy of the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#).



Pages from dress silk sample book, ca. 1890-1900. Book approximately 18 x 12 in. Photo from Whitaker Auctions [May 2009 catalog](#).

of thickness to the book, so it needs a little help staying shut. At 10 inches, it's small enough that I can carry it around to the fabric store to match things.

Antique sample books may have glued in their swatches, but I use mine to organize them, so my book has to reflect what I actually own. That's why I decided to mount my samples with loops of tape. That way, I can move swatches around to see if they match things or remove a swatch that I've used up.

I make labels on card stock and tape them in the same way, so as the stash changes, my labels can change without damaging the pages.

I decided to start a sample book for my fabric stash after I vowed to clear out clutter for my New Year's resolution. I bought a plain-page, leather bound journal to use as my base book. The elastic band is really handy because the fabric samples add plenty



Ribbons and flat trims can also be stored this way. Whatever is added to the pages will bulk up the thickness of the book, so a prodigious stash may require separate books categorized by material, color, or project.

*Elizabeth Hayes is an English scholar and folk artist who enjoys learning about the lives of literary characters beyond their literary descriptions. Her favorite aspect of costuming is educating about the quirks and tricks of costuming/everyday historical life. An earlier version of this article appeared in her January 29 2013 post to her costuming blog, "[The Pragmatic Costumer](#)."*