

One of the best loved vintage quilts is the Grandmother's Flower Garden. These hexagon quilts of bright pastel prints can be found in antique shops, flea markets and attics but very few new ones are made. There is a good reason for this. This is a very labor intensive quilt pattern, usually pieced and quilted by hand.



20th Century Grandmother's Flower Garden

Grandmother's Flower Garden quilts bring to mind the Great Depression of the 1930's. We can imagine our own grandmothers busily sewing together one of these lovely quilts using scraps from her scrap basket. Such a quilt would be a cheerful reminder of colorful flower gardens; a much needed lift during hard times. This pattern had become very popular during the 1920s and continued to be a favorite for many years.

Roots in 18th Century Hexagon Quilts

This pieced hexagon quilt had roots in England as far back as the 18th century. Immigrants soon brought this pattern to America. Hexagon templates for these quilts have been found that were made around 1770.¹ This leads historians to believe that the hexagon pattern might be one of the oldest pieced patterns.

The earliest known American made hexagon quilt is dated 1807 while an English hexagon quilt is dated even earlier. It's likely they were made for years before that time as quilts of this era were often not dated and few of the quilts made this early have survived to be enjoyed today.

Early names were Honeycomb or Six Sided Patchwork

In the 19th century hexagon quilts were known as Mosaic quilts, Honeycomb quilts or Six Sided Patchwork. Barbara Brackman tells us, "The design sustained its popularity across the decades, changing from chintz to silk to wool to calicoes, first in brown cottons, then grays and then pastels."²

Godey's Ladies Book, founded in 1830, published the hexagon pattern in 1835. It is thought to be the first pieced quilt pattern published in America. All things English were emulated by cultured American women during this period and making hexagon quilts was very popular in England. The article proclaimed, "Perhaps there is not patchwork that is prettier or more ingenious ... than the hexagon or six sided: this is also called honey-comb patchwork."³

The way the hexagons were arranged changed over the years. In her book that was published in 1929 Ruth Finley stated, "The Honeycomb', also a one-patch quilt, was made of hexagon patches sewed together without any attempt at color arrangement. But these six-sided patches were too suggestive of design not to invite experiment at the hand of the color-loving women who worked with them. Even the oldest tattered remnants of hexagon quilts show attempts at sorting and arrangement of colors. In time various more or less elaborate 'mosaic' patterns resulted."⁴



By the 20th century hexagon quilts were usually made in the Grandmother's Flower Garden pattern. These contained a center hexagon circled by six colorful printed or solid hexagons with another row of 12 hexagons around that. The centers were sometimes yellow to represent the flower's center. Between each flower was a row of colored solid hexagons to represent the background. A green background might have been the garden while white could have been a white picket fence.

How English Paper Piecing is Done

During the 19th century hexagon quilts were made using the English paper piecing method. With this method a hexagon template had to be cut out of paper or light cardboard for each hexagon patch. If the quilt maker was very careful after she finished sewing them together she might be able to take some of these hexagon templates out to be used another time. Other quilters left the templates in giving us the opportunity to date some of these quilts by the pieces of newspaper left in the quilt.

Mosaic paper piecing was done using other shapes as well. This included triangles, diamonds and just about any shape that could be fit together. Sometimes these quilts are called one patch quilts as there is only one shape used throughout the quilt.

You can visualize this better if I describe the process of English paper piecing to you. Once the templates are prepared a piece of fabric had to be cut so there would be about ¼ inch showing all around the template. The extending fabric was then folded over the template and basted down. Finally each of the hexagon pieces was whipstitched together from the back side.⁵

The resulting stitches were smaller and tighter than a quilt made with running stitches would be. To top that off the hexagons used in the nineteenth century were usually smaller than those used for the later Grandmother's Flower Garden. Some of these early honeycomb quilts were made up of hexagons as small as one inch or even a half inch across.

How Grandmother's Flower Garden quilts were made



This is not to diminish the work that went into a 20th century Grandmother's Flower Garden. During the first decades of the 20th century most quilt makers aspired to make at least one Grandmother's Flower Garden quilt. These quilts may have been made up of slightly larger hexagons and were more often sewn together with a running stitch but finishing one was still a major accomplishment.

Add to that the fact that the binding often followed the lines of the hexagon resulting in interesting but also more difficult bindings. The border in the picture shown in this section is delightful in its use of multiple rows of hexagons for the border. Note how the quilter sometimes substituted other colors in the rows possibly because she was running out of fabric in some colors.

Grandmother's Flower Garden quilts were often quilted about ¼ inch on each side of the seam lines. Usually the quilting was all done with white or off white thread.

Hexagons Today

Although using hexagons and other mosaics in quilts today is uncommon some quilt artists are making mosaic quilts using traditional English paper piecing. The result can be truly stunning as can be seen in this French made hexagon quilt.



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Thank you to [The Quilt Complex](#) for giving permission to display two of the quilts shown on this page. Visit their site to discover the services they provide to museums, collectors, dealers, individuals, and quilt guilds.

Find a Colonial Revival version of this quilt at [Free Grandmother's Flower Quilt Pattern](#).

References:

¹ [Illinois State Museum: Keeping us in Stitches: Quilts and Quilters: Pieced Quilts: Hexagon](#)

² p169, "[Clues in the Calico](#)", by Barbara Brackman

³ p41, Godey's Lady's Book, vol. 10, January 1835

⁴ p49 "[Old patchwork Quilts and The Women Who Made Them](#)", by Ruth Finley

⁵ [Illinois State Museum: Keeping us in Stitches: Quilts and Quilters: English Paper Piecing](#)