Julia Brennan of Caring for Textiles on preserving heirlooms

Julia Brennan, founder of Caring for Textiles, joined staff writer Jana Komisar last week for our Home Front online chat. Here is an edited excerpt.

Q: Is the delicate cycle on washing machines too rough for heirloom linens? Should you always hand wash, and do you have a favorite cleaner or soap to use?
A: All machines are too rigorous on heirlooms, delicate items, and special textiles or garments. Hand-washing can be controlled and treats textiles gently. Use a gentle detergent and a softener. Brighteners, bleaches, enzymes, boosters, etc. can often be used in these detergents. It is pretty mild and works well.

Q: How can I preserve my 1960s jeans?
A: Don’t wash them. Keep them out of the light and safely wrapped, and only take them out occasionally. Love them and wear them gently.

Q: I have some very old lace table runners that have yellowed. Is there any method to safely whiten lace to its original color?
A: Cloth, lace, and linens yellow and discolor with age. These stains and discolorations are often of “age spots.” Some we just have to learn to live with. Any colored embroidery or other embellishments could bleed during cleaning. The discolored parts may indicate that the fabric fibers are weakened, and therefore any cleaning needs to be done carefully. Don’t use bleach, harsh chemicals or washing machines. Try a simple flat wet cleaning with mild detergent, then dry the item flat or in the sun for no more than 30 to 40 minutes. Sun does weaken fibers, but a short exposure will help brighten the wet linen.

Q: Should you hand wash or dry-clean wool or cashmere knitwear?
A: They can be washed in cool water with a mild detergent and left flat, blocked out to the shape you want. It’s an easy and good option. If a dye might bleed or there is a bad stain, consult an experienced dry-cleaner.

Q: Julia Brennan suggests hand-washing heirloom linens because it treats textiles gently. Out of the light and safely wrapped, and only take them out occasionally. Love them and wear them gently.

Q: I have three quilts made by my great-grandmother circa 1920 and 1930. How do I clean and store them?
A: Quilts are tricky because there are so many different materials and colors, stitching methods, and battings. I do not recommend cleaning the quilts yourself. You can certainly vacuum them and then store them in a cool, dry place. I recommend using a vacuum attachment designed for cleaning quilts and quilting. It is important to regularly inspect the quilts for any signs of wear or damage.

Q: I inherited some 1960s newspapers from my parents’ house that contain coverage of the JFK assassination and the moon landing. I have them in a plastic bag in my closet. Do you have any suggestions for preserving them?
A: Consult a paper conservator. The American Institute for Conservation has an online referral for conservators by area. Plastic is generally not good, because moisture can build up inside sealed or closed plastic bags or containers and cause mold or mildew.

Q: Do mothballs work to kill clothing moths? Are cedar or mothballs more useful to deter them?
A: Yes, mothballs work, but they attract insects. If you don’t have an infestation, don’t use them. Many things deter insects, but few eliminate them. In general, cedar chips, clove sachets, and lemongrass are deterrents but will not prevent an invasion. Mothballs are unhealthy and again are only a deterrent, so I don’t use them.

Q: Are you still stumped on occasion with a garment or fabric, or have you seen it all?
A: I’ve seen but a fraction. Often textiles come into my lab and pose a great challenge. This requires thoughtful consideration of different approaches to conservation treatment, testing, learning more about the piece or genre, and rethinking what is the most minimal and suitable method to apply. Often a perky textile takes weeks to mull over and may involve consulting with other conservators. That is what keeps the daily work alive, exciting and challenging. Knowing my professional limits is also key; I turn down projects that I do not feel I have the skills to address.

Q: What typically causes a dark rusty stain on old linens? Or is it just the age of any stain that turns dark?
A: Dark brown stains and a sort of “foxing” pattern of brown and dark yellow stains on fabrics are pretty common, and they happen when the cellulose breaks down and discolors. Wood or acidic paper or just the humid climate can also cause fabrics to splotch with brown stains. Rust stains are usually directly associated with a pin or metal component touching the fabric.

Julia Brennan

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Read the rest of this transcript and submit questions to the next chat, Thursday at 11 a.m., at live.washingtonpost.com.