

Chapter 12

DECREASES + YARNOVERS = LACE

If we page through any knitting book with lace patterns or projects, we'll find an astonishing variety of shapes and forms that can be created with careful positioning of decreases and increases, especially yarnovers. Many of those effects are created by separating the yarnovers from their corresponding decreases with one or more stitches.

A full-blown treatment of lace created in knitting is way beyond the scope of this book, but we can at least look at some of the basics.¹

The Two Lace Techniques

There are disagreements over the terms used for the two different ways that knitters can create lace, *lace knitting* and *knitted lace*. If we look into a variety of knitting books and on the Internet, we'll see both terms as well as arguments about which of these two names should be applied to which technique.

Let's just focus on the two techniques themselves, which might be more accurately named *easy lace* and *hard lace*.

Easy Lace: Lace Action on Only Half the Rows

In the easier technique, we make yarnovers and decreases only on public-side rows. Private-side rows, sometimes called *resting rows*, are worked evenly.

If we knit back on private-side rows, we're creating a lace fabric in garter stitch. If we purl back, we're creating lace in stockinette stitch. If we're working in the round, every other round is usually simply knit, which will create stockinette lace fabric.

But the key thing is that we do not work any yarnovers or decreases on half of the rows (or rounds).

Hard Lace: Lace Action on All Rows

In the more difficult technique, we will have to do yarnovers and decreases on the private-side rows as well as on the public-side rows (on all rounds if working circularly). That means we have to pay very close attention on **every** row/round.

If we're creating lace in garter stitch, then the decreases we use on private-side rows are K2tog and SSK/SKP. If we're creating lace in stockinette stitch in the round, then we again use K2tog and SSK/SKP.

¹ As I was making final edits on this book, I finally bought Susanna E. Lewis's *Knitting Lace*. She covers the same material contained in this chapter and in the appendix "Lace Diamond Details," but she takes all of it to their absolute ends. Do note that some of her chart symbols don't have the same meanings that are used in this book.

If we're creating lace in stockinette stitch worked flat, then we may have to do the purling equivalents of K2togs and SSKs/SKPs on the private-side rows so that, on the public side, the decreases lean in the proper direction.²

Three Lace Diamonds

In the purl diamond project, the diamond motif was made with purl bumps. In these three projects, yarnover holes form the diamonds.

We'll see the first project, in easy lace, immediately. Once we've worked through charting the written-out instructions and discussed various options, we'll chart the second two projects, both of which are hard lace.

Easy Lace: No Lace Action on Private-Side Rows

Typical instructions are given here. How much do you want to bet motif and border stitches have been mingled? (You should definitely bet that they are.)

PROJECT 3: EASY LACE DIAMOND

CO 19.

Rows 1–7: K.

Rows 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, and 22

(WS): K3, P13, K3.

Row 9 (RS): K8, K2tog, yo, K9.

Row 11: K7, K2tog, yo, K1, yo, SSK, K7.

Row 13: K6, K2tog, yo, K3, yo, SSK, K6.

Row 15: K5, K2tog, yo, K5, yo, SSK, K5.

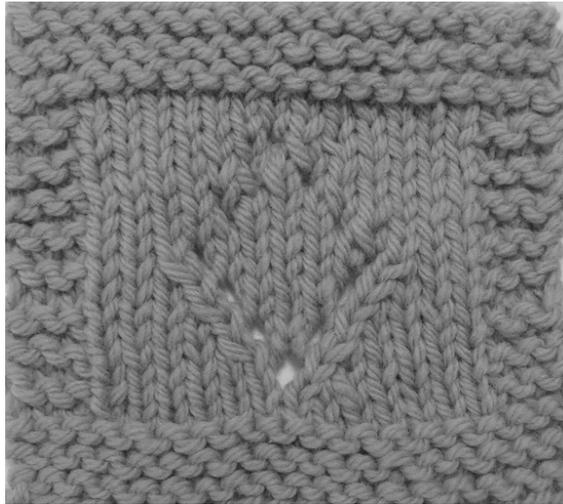
Row 17: K6, SSK, yo, K3, yo, K2tog, K6.

Row 19: K7, SSK, yo, K1, yo, K2tog, K7.

Row 21: K8, SSK, yo, K9.

Rows 23–28: K.

BO.



Let's do a cursory examination of the instructions.

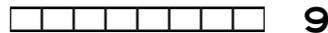
As with the purl diamond project, it's difficult to tell exactly where the border stitches start and stop in the instructions for public-side rows between row nine and row twenty-one. The first six rows and last six rows seem to be top and bottom borders in garter stitch. We

² While we're swatching with thin yarn to find the desired needle size, it would be worthwhile to also see if we can simplify all decreases to K2togs and P2togs without ruining the design.

To make the complete project chart, we'll just chart a copy of row eight after each public-side motif row and use the correct row number.

The Public-Side Motif Rows

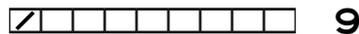
We'll read the written-out instructions in the normal, left-to-right direction, which means we have to add the symbols from right to left, according to the rules of reversal from chapter 1. Row nine is where we start the diamond motif at its bottom point, which we make with a K2tog and a yarnover. So we chart from right to left, starting with the row number and the eight knit stitches.



Remember that although a K2tog starts with two stitches, it winds up as a single stitch, so we'll use the convention of representing it with a symbol that's only one stitch wide.

As mirror-image knitters chart written-out instructions, they have to remember that the instructions assume public-side rows will be worked right to left. That means each "K2tog" in the written-out instructions must be shown in the chart with a right-leaning decrease symbol and each "SSK" (or "SKP" or other left-leaning decrease) with a left-leaning decrease symbol. It's only when MIKs work from the completed chart that they do a K2tog at each left-leaning decrease symbol and an SSK/SKP at each right-leaning decrease symbol.

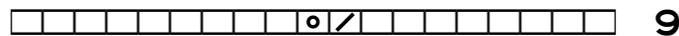
Since a K2tog leans to the right for traditional knitters, that's the decrease symbol **all** knitters must use as we chart.



Then we add the yarnover.



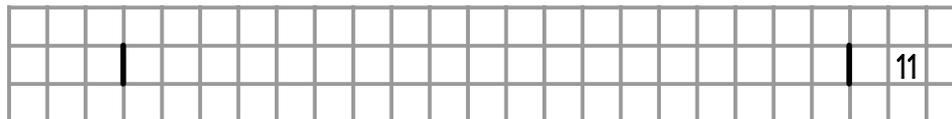
Since the yarnover makes up for the stitch lost in the K2tog, row nine remains nineteen stitches wide when we add the final nine knit stitches.



Charting Row Eleven on Paper

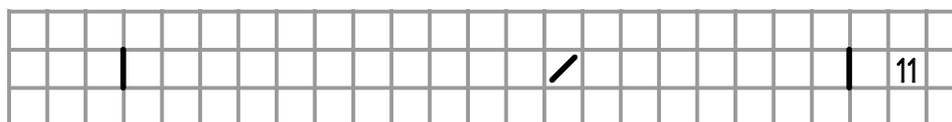
I'm lazy, so each grid cell will represent a public-side knit. I won't draw their borders or add any other mark.

We know that the row is nineteen stitches wide because each decrease has a corresponding increase. To separate the row's symbols from the surrounding grid, we draw vertical boundary lines nineteen grid cells apart, as shown on a scrap of grid paper.

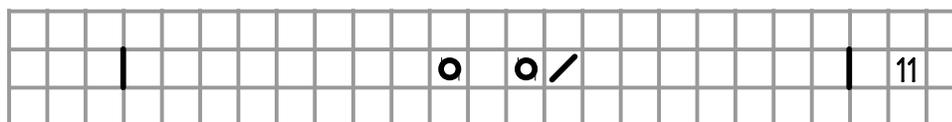


Now, since we're working on paper, it's easy to draw the symbols in the order they would be worked by a traditional knitter, which is from right to left.

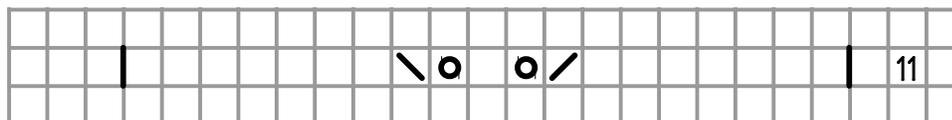
The row starts with "K7," so we skip to the eighth grid cell from the right. That brings us to the "K2tog," which all of us, traditional and mirror-image knitters, must draw as a right-slanting decrease. MIKs don't change the symbol's meaning until they're working with needles and yarn.



We add a yarnover to the left of the K2tog, skip a cell for the knit, then add a second yarnover.



The final symbol we actually have to draw is the left-leaning SSK, because we get the final "K7" from the grid.



Charting Row Eleven in the Computer

We have the same two options for typing up public-side rows based on the rule of reversal.

- ☞ We read the instructions in the normal way, but we re-position the cursor to the left of each group after we type it.
- ☞ We read the written-out instruction line backwards, from the last group to the first group, which lets us type in the ordinary way and avoid moving the cursor by hand.

Option A: Type a Group, Then Move the Cursor to Its Left

Starting with the first group of the instruction line, we are supposed to knit seven, so we type the entire group at once

kkkkkkk

then move the cursor to the left of them all.

After the seven knit stitches, the next “group” is a K2tog, so with the cursor all the way to the left, we type a

/

to show the right-leaning decrease (even if we’re MIKs, because written-out instructions assume we’re all traditional knitters). We move the cursor to its left and type a lowercase

y

to add the yarnover. We move the cursor to its left, type a lowercase

k

move the cursor to its left, and add another yarnover with a lowercase

y

After we move the cursor to its left, we have a left-leaning SSK, typed in with a

(whether we’re a traditional or mirror-image knitter), and we move the cursor to its left. Then, since we have a group of seven knit stitches, we can simply type them all at once.

kkkkkkk

The entire line is typed as

kkkkkkk\yky/kkkkkkk

Option B: Read the Written-Out Instructions Backwards

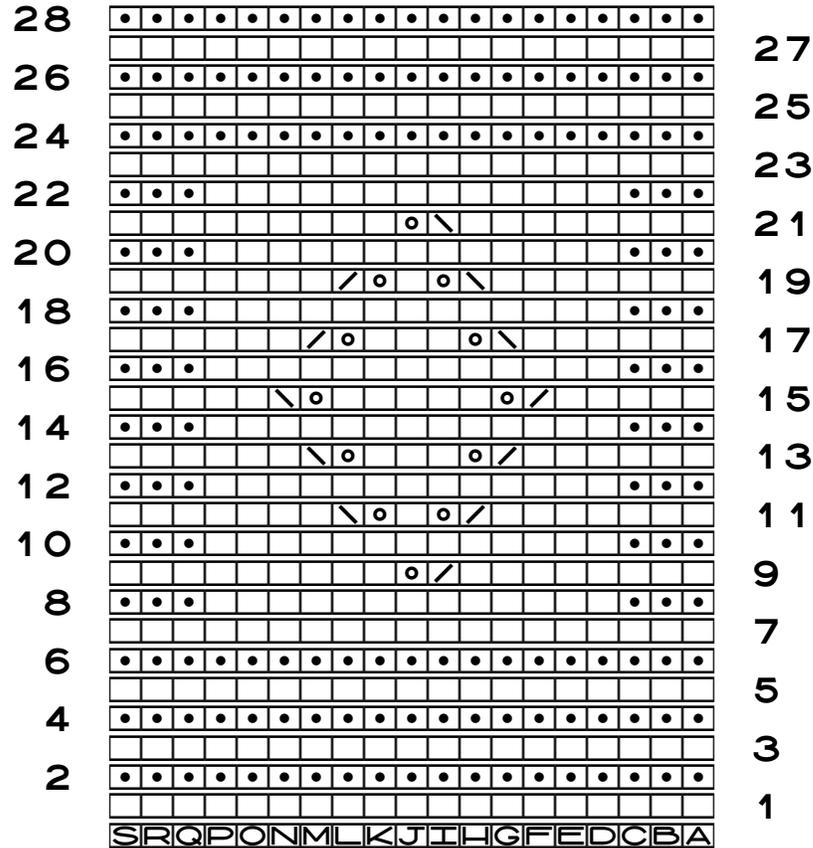
Here’s line eleven again.

Row 11: K7, K2tog, yo, K1, yo, SSK, K7.

The last instruction is to knit a group of seven, so we type

kkkkkkk

to start the chart line with what will actually be the last stitches we work.



The chart clearly shows both the border stitches and the stitches that make up the lace diamond, and, as we suspected, the motif and border stitches were not separated from one another in the written-out instructions.

Mirror-image knitters would, if they so desire, alter this completed chart by reversing the locations of the row numbers and/or by running the boxed letters in reverse order.

If we need to do a border-ectomy, we remove rows one through six and twenty-three through twenty-eight along with stitches A through C and Q through S.

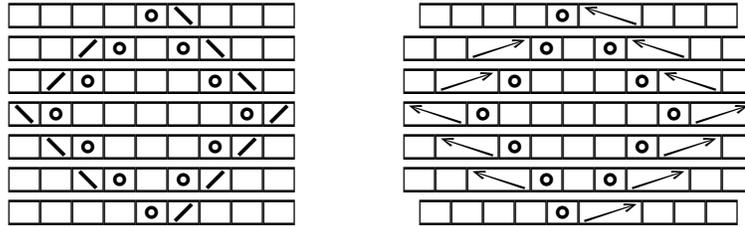
If we want the border to be seed stitch, we adjust those same rows and stitches to alternate knit and purl both horizontally and vertically.

If we want a wider border, we add rows before row one and after row twenty-eight, and we add stitches before stitch A and after stitch S.

An Alternate Way to Chart the Easy Lace Diamond

Since we're just purling back through the motif on the private-side rows, we could actually

That technique doesn't work quite so well in lace, because it alters the relationships between symbols on adjacent rows. Here's the compact version of the chart with double-width decrease symbols substituted.



The Number of Stitches in Each Row Is Misleading

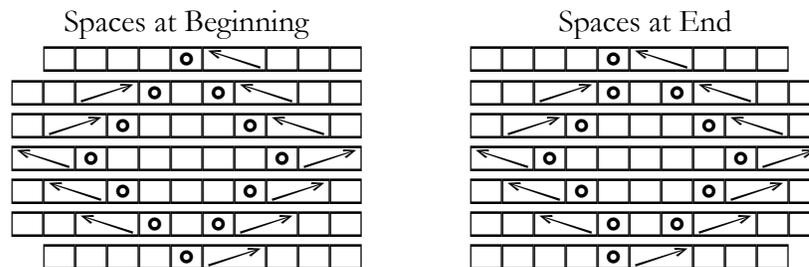
Note that the first and last lines of the pattern are shorter by the equivalent of one stitch, since there is only one decrease symbol on those two rows but it's two stitches wide.

The Relative Positions of the Stitches Are Misleading

This issue is related to the first. Since the number of stitches isn't quite right, then it's difficult to have the proper alignment between the rows.

What If We Add Spaces?

Putting spaces at the beginnings of the first and last rows does keep the yarnovers aligned, but it still looks, incorrectly, like those pattern rows are one stitch shorter than the middle motif rows. Putting the spaces at the end of the first and last rows looks a bit odd.



For those of us who can get past the difficulties that either of these charts have, then we can by all means chart lace this way.

Hard Lace: Lace Action on All Rows

If you looked closely at the photo of the easy lace project, you might have noticed that it didn't seem, well, quite right.

That’s because it isn’t. I deliberately left some of it looking a bit messy, because trying to make it look perfectly symmetrical was an interesting exercise. If you’re curious about all the details, they’re in the appendix “Lace Diamond Details.”

Because of all that experimentation, there are two projects in hard lace, one with prominent decreases and one with minimized decreases.

Drawing the Chart

All knitters, traditional **and** mirror-image, construct the chart as though they were traditional knitters, because of the unwritten assumption that public-side rows are worked right to left. A “K2tog” in the written-out instructions **must always** be drawn as a right-slanting decrease and an “SSK” (and “SKP” and similar decreases) as left-slanting.

Both hard lace projects use the following symbol key.

Hard Lace Symbol Key for Traditional Knitters	
	Knit on RS, purl on WS
	Purl on RS, knit on WS
	Yarnover
	K2tog on RS, P2tog on WS
	SSK/SKP on RS, SSP/SPP on WS
	S2PP (on WS row, sl 3 sts to working needle P-wise, turn to RS, S2KP, sl st to other needle, turn to WS, complete row)
	Centered eyelet
	P1B: Purl in row below (to pull strand up out of yo)

For Mirror-Image Knitters

Mirror-image knitters reverse the decreases they do for each symbol.

MIK Symbol Key Changes	
	K2tog on RS, P2tog on WS
	SSK/SKP on RS, SSP/SPP on WS

After charting the written-out instructions, MIKs can, if they like, swap the locations of the row numbers and run stitch labels in the opposite direction, putting “1” or “A” at the left edge of the chart.

If they make both changes, they can talk about all of the charts’ details with traditional knitters without having to “translate” any terms or constantly switch “left” and “right.”

Charting the Private-Side Rows

We already worked through a public-side chart row for easy lace, and we do the hard lace's public-side rows the same exact way. Now we need to work through the instructions for a private-side row of hard lace.

Remember that as we chart private-side rows, we read the instructions in the normal left-to-right direction and add the symbols to the chart from left to right, but we have to switch knits to purls, and vice versa. Since we're doing directional decreases on the private side, we have to **work** the purl counterparts with needles and yarn, but the symbols we put **in the chart** are exactly the same. **All** knitters will chart a "P2tog" in the instructions as a right-slanting decrease and an "SSP" (or "SPP" or similar) as a left-slanting decrease.

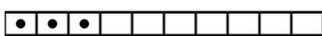
Let's work through row ten on the version with the minimized decreases. We'll see only the computer charts here, but paper charts would look very similar, especially if we imagine the knit symbols without their outlines.

Row 10: K3, P7, P2tog, yo, P1, yo, SSP, P7, K3.

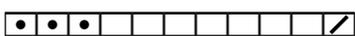
First we have the row number and the three garter stitch left border stitches, which we have to show as public-side purls.

10 

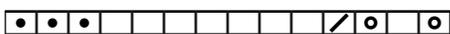
Then we have seven purls, which we show as public-side knits.

10 

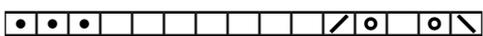
Now we come to the decrease and yarnover pair. Since we know that a P2tog made on the private side looks like a K2tog made on the public side, we all, traditional and mirror-image knitters, have to use the right-slanting decrease symbol for the P2tog.

10 

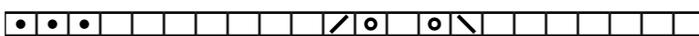
Then we add a yarnover, a private-side purl, and a second yarnover.

10 

We have the other directional decrease next, which all knitters chart as a left-leaning decrease. Traditional knitters will work an SSP/SPP, while MIKs will work a P2tog. Just as K2tog and P2tog go together, so do SSK/SSP (or SKP/SPP).

10 

Then we finish up with P7

10 

and K3 for the garter stitch right border.



We've Seen This Effect Before

When we're charting decreases along diagonal lines of yarnovers, we see the exact same effect we saw in "Decreases" for shaping mitten fingertips.

If the decreases' slant points at the diagonal line, the decreases will be much less apparent. If the decreases' slant runs parallel to the diagonal line of yarnovers, the decreases will be prominent. For additional information, see the appendix "Lace Diamond Details."

Working with the Chart Upside-Down

When we're working hard lace with lots of directional decreases, what happens if we turn the chart upside-down so we can read the private-side chart rows in the same direction we work with needles and yarn?

Absolutely nothing. As we saw in "Decreases," when we turn upside-down a chart with decreases, the decreases all still slant the same direction. None of us, traditional or mirror-image knitter, needs to do any mental or needle gymnastics just because we're working with the chart upside-down.

Note that working with thin yarn on big needles may allow us to use K2togs and P2togs for all decreases on public- and private-side rows, respectively. If our swatch just doesn't look right with all P2togs, then we'll have to use the directional purl decreases as specified in the rest of this section.

Traditional Knitters

A right-slanting symbol still means a "2tog" decrease, and a left-slanting symbol still means an "SS" decrease.

If the lace is forming garter stitch, we still work on private-side rows K2togs for right-slanting decreases and SSKs/SKPs for left-slanting decreases.

We use the purl decreases on private-side rows if the lace fabric is supposed to form stockinette, but we don't have to do any swapping of which decrease is done where. We still use P2togs for right-slanting and SSPs/SPPs for left-slanting decreases.

Mirror-Image Knitters

A left-slanting symbol still means a "2tog" decrease, and a right-slanting symbol still means an "SS" decrease.

If the lace fabric is forming garter stitch, we still work on private-side rows K2togs for left-slanting decreases and SSKs/SKPs for right-slanting decreases.

We use the purl decreases on private-side rows if the lace fabric is supposed to form stockinette, but we don't have to do any swapping of which decrease is done where. We still use P2togs for left-slanting and SSPs/SPPs for right-slanting decreases.

Switching a Lace Chart to the Other Technique

The compact form of the easy lace chart, which omits the private-side rows, looks exactly like a hard lace chart.⁵ If we look at the charts for hard lace, we could, for this particular motif, insert plain rows between each chart row, which would transform the project from hard lace to easy lace.

So if we have a lace pattern in one technique, then we **might** be able to switch it to the other technique by simply interpreting the chart the other way (it would probably be prudent to correct the row numbers, though, just so we don't get confused).

It all depends on exactly what the lace is supposed to look like. If the lace forms a leaf or a flower, it almost certainly has to be hard lace to get the full detail needed. In that case, switching it to easy lace by working the private-side rows plain might destroy the pattern.

For geometric shapes like the diamond, though, there's a good chance we could switch from hard to easy or from easy to hard.

How can we know for sure? Well, there we run into, yet again, the *s* word. The only thing we can do, really, is swatch and see what happens.

Other Decrease-Positioning Possibilities

As we said at the beginning of the chapter, lace's decreases don't have to be right next to the yarnovers. Separating the two means that the inherent lean of K2togs and SSKs/SKPs will slant the grain of the fabric quite obviously.

Let's look at the two possibilities, since we could make the decreases lean mirror-image in two ways. The charts are easy lace, since they show only the public-side rows. (Row fourteen is shown so that we remember to work the P1B defined in the symbol key.)

⁵ Remember that the hard lace charts take advantage of the information in the appendix "Lace Diamond Details" to make them look as symmetric as possible.

[maps website](#). Charts made there **show** the stitch symbols interacting with one another, tilting in response to the decreases, yarnovers, and other increases around them.

A Complete Reference

Again, Susanna E. Lewis's *Knitting Lace* is a full-blown exposition on **how** and **why** stitches in lace fabric react the way they do to the decreases, yarnovers, and other increases around them. She explains thoroughly how to take advantage of these results so that we can create our own designs.