

## Knitting grows in popularity, thanks to hard times and Big Stitch needles

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John Kuntz/The Plain Dealer Becca Smith, the owner of BagSmith in Shaker Heights, keeps coming up with cutting-edge innovations for knitters, including the Big Stitch needles she's working with.



John Kuntz/The Plain Dealer BagSmith's Original Little Bag kit makes a cute basic bag that can easily be embellished into a one-of-a-kind handbag.

### BagSmith

**Where:** BagSmith products (including purse kits, needles and books on Big Stitch knitting written by Becca Smith) are sold locally at [Fine Points Gallery](#), 12620 Larchmere Blvd., Cleveland, 216-229-6644.

**Web:** For more information, or to order, go to [bagsmith.com](http://bagsmith.com) or call 1-888-879-7224.

Hard times are good times for the knitting business.

After 9/11, the craft saw a huge boom. Knitting shops -- heck, knitting cafes, in some cities -- sprang up and a veritable industry of knitting books and magazines joined them.

The craze calmed down a bit in recent years, but Becca Smith says the current economic climate is fueling another round of "knitting is hip."

"History has shown that poor economic times have people staying home and doing DIY projects," Smith says. "Besides being relaxing, as knitting is, I think people also are looking for stylish fashion and home decor items they can make, without blowing their budgets."

Smith, of Orange, has a Shaker Heights-based business, called BagSmith (more on that name later) that is an international knitting supply wholesaler.

Now, she's offering a new twist -- Big Stitch knitting needles.

They're almost the size of baseball bats, and they are hand-made from basswood right here in Northeast Ohio.

It might be the next big thing in knitting -- pun intended.

Becca Smith and her husband Herb came to Cleveland from Chicago in 1979. They were both in the executive search business and still are -- Herb now runs DHR International Cleveland and Becca runs H.C. Smith Ltd., which specializes in assignments for nonprofit organizations.

In her travels, Becca had met a Chinese handbag manufacturer, and the Smiths and he joined together to create a line of basic travel and business bags. That's how their BagSmith business was born in 1997.

But Becca, who has been a knitter for most of her life, had another idea in the early 2000s. Knitting was popular, but many women got as far as knitting scarves, then stopped. They didn't feel ready to take on more complicated fare, yet how many scarves did anyone need?

"I'd be on an airplane for 18 or 20 hours, knitting, and then I got this idea for something else women could make -- a purse," Smith says.

That led to another venture in 2002, BagSmith's "Our Original Little Bag Purse Kit." The kits come with a DVD that shows even novice knitters how to knit a basic rectangle they can turn into a cute retro-chic handbag, complete with stylish handles and a big-button closure. People can also embellish them however they please: with beads or vintage brooches, perhaps. The kits range in price from \$25 to \$100.

The purse kits, now available in six different styles -- including the Yoo Hoo Bamboo, with bamboo handle -- are still selling strong. About 600 retailers around the country carry them; they've sold nearly 10,000 since 2002.

Adding even more to their bottom line sales is BagSmith's famous "project bag," a canvas bag incorporating a metal stand, which has 17 pockets for needles, yarn and scissors, and retails for \$32. "We've sold about 50,000 of those," says Smith.

Locally, they are carried by Fine Points Gallery. "People like the kits because everything is complete and even beginners can do it," says owner Liz Tekus. "It's a fun project, and when you're finished, you've got something hip you'll actually carry."

On one of her recent travels to knitting and yarn trade shows around the world, Smith met a woman from England named Rachel John, who'd started a movement called "extreme knitting," which was done with, yes, extremely large needles.

"These needles were so big she could knit with 1,000 strands on one," says Smith. "She literally had to stand on a balcony to knit a huge rug."

That wouldn't be workable for most people, of course. "So we refined the needles to fit them to North American knitters," Smith says. "On our needles, you can do 25 to 40 strands at a time -- a stitch per inch is the gauge."

Besides the knitting needles, BagSmith now also makes supersize crochet hooks for the same reason. All the needles are hand-carved by John Higgins, the husband of one of BagSmith's employees, who lives in Perry in Lake County. The big knitting needles start at \$44; the crochet hooks, made of maple, at \$30.

Now, people can knit major pieces like blankets, shawls or jackets a lot faster, Smith says. There's another benefit, too.

Knitters know it as the problem of "stash." It's all the leftover yarn that accumulates over the years: not enough for any item in particular, but too much to discard.

The huge knitting needles allow knitters to use up their stash in a piece that artfully incorporates the varying colors of the stash into a one-of-a-kind blend.

And Smith has had yet another idea. She was approached by an Ohio alpaca mill owner and learned about all the alpaca owners here (this state has the most alpacas of any state in the nation). A number of them don't do anything with the fiber that comes from the annual shearing.

So Smith has created a blend of a yarn that's 60 percent alpaca, combined with wool and nylon, that is great for knitting coats, blankets or rugs, especially on the Big Stitch needles.

"Now we're concentrating on getting all our alpaca yarn from Ohio breeders," says Smith.

Tekus is also selling the large needles (and yarn) at Fine Points. "It's a very dramatic way for people to use up their stash, and they love it," she says. "You can make something out of even a crummy old purchase of yarn that was a lapse in judgment.

"With these needles, you make something you'll actually use -- like making a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Smith took the yarn and needles to a recent trade show near San Francisco, two fashion designers -- Jonathan David Baker and Bethany Meuleners -- bought a bunch of the yarn for a collection they'll debut at New York Fashion Week in September.

Smith is dizzy with enthusiasm.

"This is just the beginning," she says, "of something really big."

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