Shrinkage: What Causes It and How to Control It

A variety of conditions contribute to shrinkage. As a quilter develops their longarm skills, this is one of the hardest things to master.

--Keep the quilt taut enough to keep the quilting from "sucking up" extra fabric WITHOUT being so tight that you start experiencing thread breaks due to needle deflection. If needle deflection is an issue, slow the machine speeds way down.

--Use the lowest number of stitches-per-inch suitable for the detail in the design. If your quilting software has a "stitch in points" option, you can sometimes use a low spi setting and use the stitch in points option to maintain the higher level of detail.

--Use the thinnest thread appropriate for your project.

--Use the lowest loft batting possible. The higher the batting loft, the more significant the quilt shrinkage. Use Quilter's Dream Cotton-Request loft, Hobbs Tuscany Cotton, or Hobbs Thermore Polyester.

--Baste, Baste, Baste. If you want to use a micro-stippling pattern in a particular area of a quilt, your best bet on handling the shrinkage (in addition to the three aforementioned items) is to Stitch in the Ditch (SID) that area (not just baste). Basting will help keep your backing and quilt top in alignment with each other but doing SID on all of the components within the quilt will work even better.


Interlocking Edge-to-Edge patterns vs Squared or Border-to-Border patterns….and shrinkage.

At first glance, you might think using a dense B2B pattern might be better than using that same pattern in an Interlocking Edge-to-Edge pattern because in a B2B pattern, there is no interlock to be impacted by shrinkage. However, a dense B2B pattern will result in visible lines (mountains or valleys) in a grid layout on your quilt, where one repeat and/or one row is juxtapositioned to the next. To avoid that grid, you would choose the interlocking edge-to-edge. Using an extremely dense e2e will require manipulation beyond just rolling the quilt and hitting "continue" or whatever command your particular software uses to move on to the next row in an e2e.

Here is an example of an extremely dense quilting pattern and some of the ways to successfully stitch it out. These patterns are part of a series called "Dream Tangles". Example is made using Statler Stitcher software and the commands from that software.

You will need to have plenty of backing so that you have plenty of working room around the outside edges, for these pattern probably and least 6" on all four sides.

First, set up your e2e off all four sides of the quilt using repeat pattern and concatenating (holding down CNTL as you select multiple patterns. You will want more of the pattern off the edge of the quilt on the right side as that is where the shrink needs to be adjusted the most. Mark everything but row 1 as sewn.
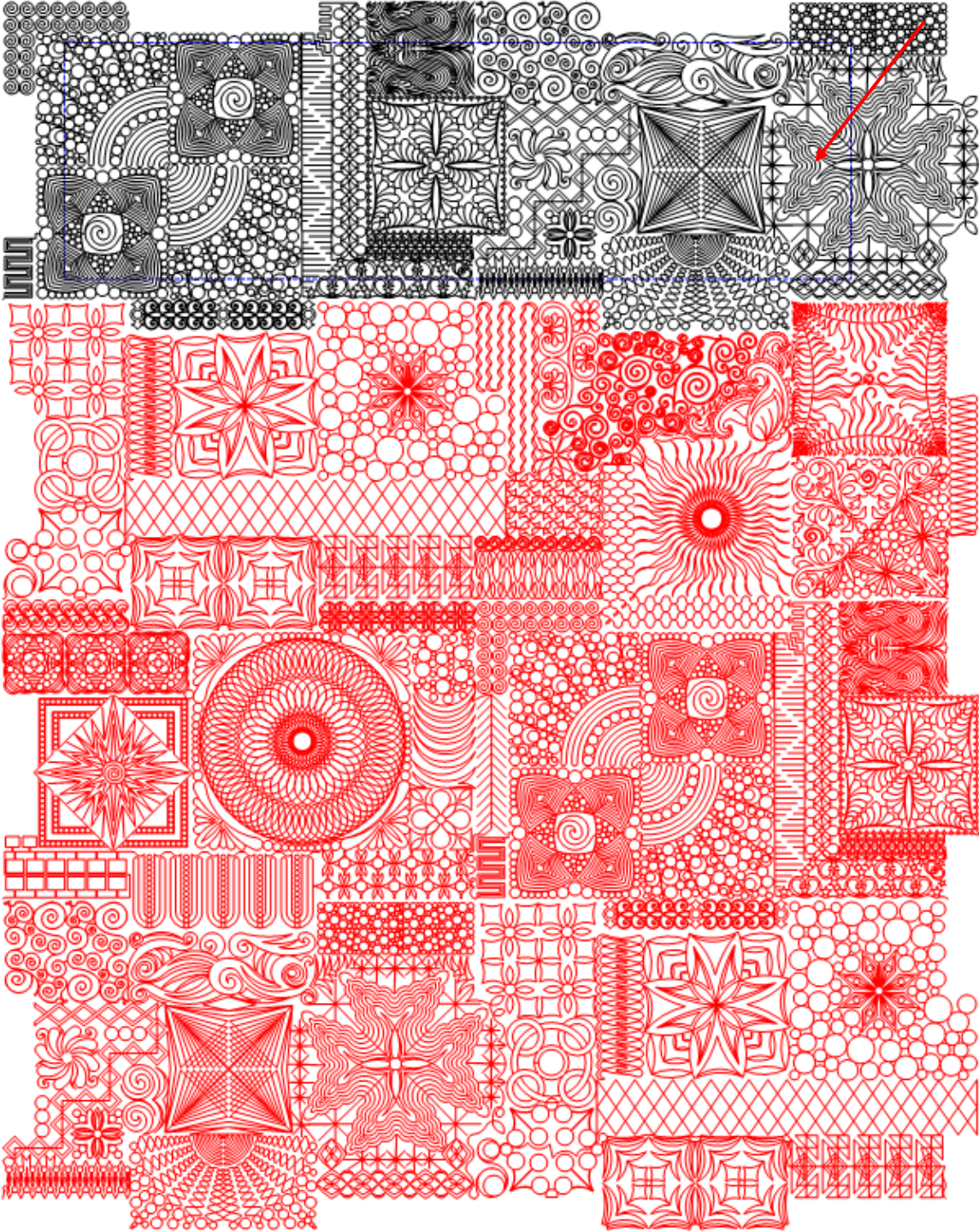
Stitch out the first row.

Roll your quilt.

Select all on your screen and "relocate- shift to 2 points". Mark the first known location on your cad screen and then the second known location on your cad screen. Use the start and endpoint, if possible, if not, use points as far apart as possible. Then, using your machine head, click that same first point on your actual quilt and then the second point on your actual quilt.

Using your boundary function, click the bottom edge of the row of stitching of the row you just stitched.

Go to the CAD screen, it will look something like this:
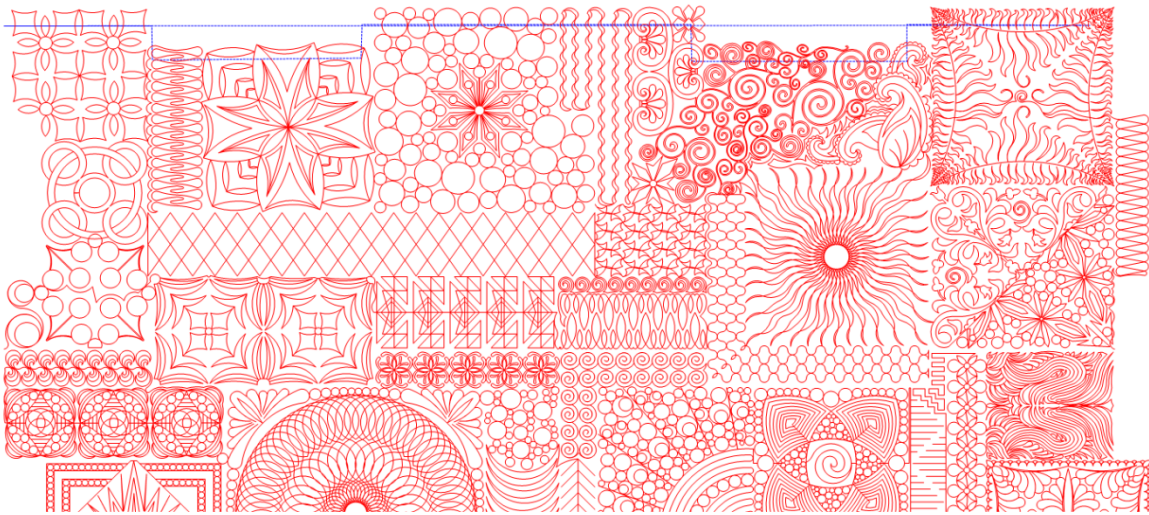
Delete the first row because it is confusing. Mark the new top row as unsewn. Now it will look like this:
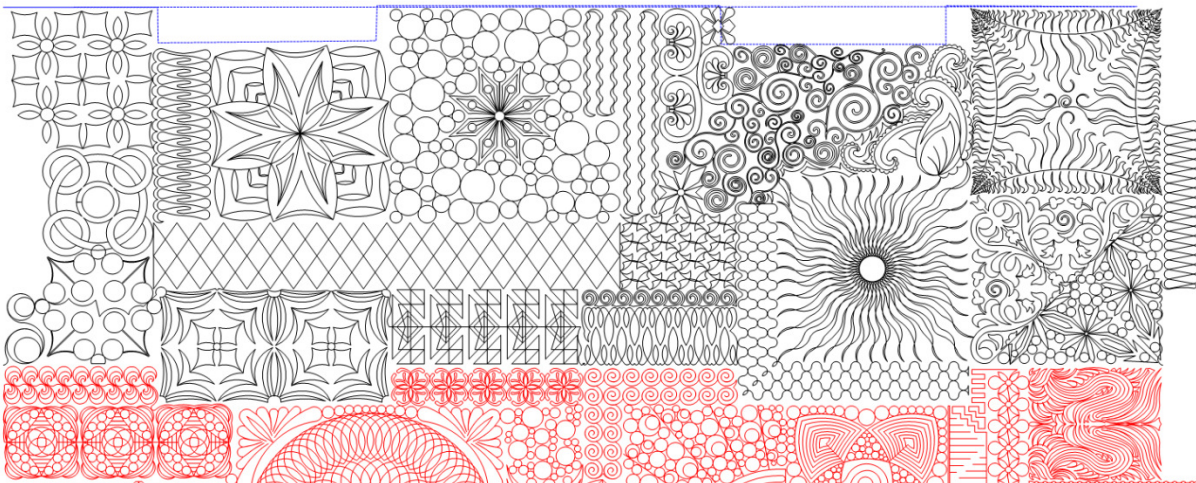
Compare the top edge of the unsewn row to the boundary you marked. Make sure your selection tool is on the purple handles, F9. Select ALL of the unsewn rows and then use the side arrow (ON THE RIGHT SIDE) to adjust the width of the unsewn rows to fit neatly into that drawn boundary.
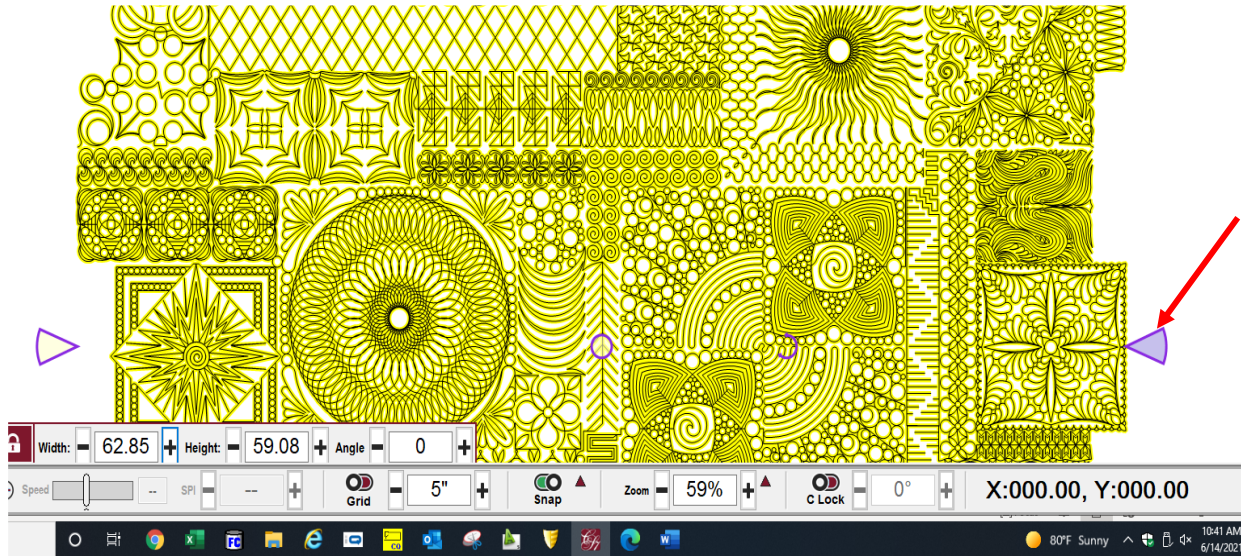
Now you may have to move everything down so that this row does not stitch on top of the previous row. You will use the down arrow on the keyboard to do this (we don't want to stretch it). You can use ALT + arrow to make small moves, CTRL + arrow to make big moves, and just arrow for medium moves. When you have it adjusted it should look like this.
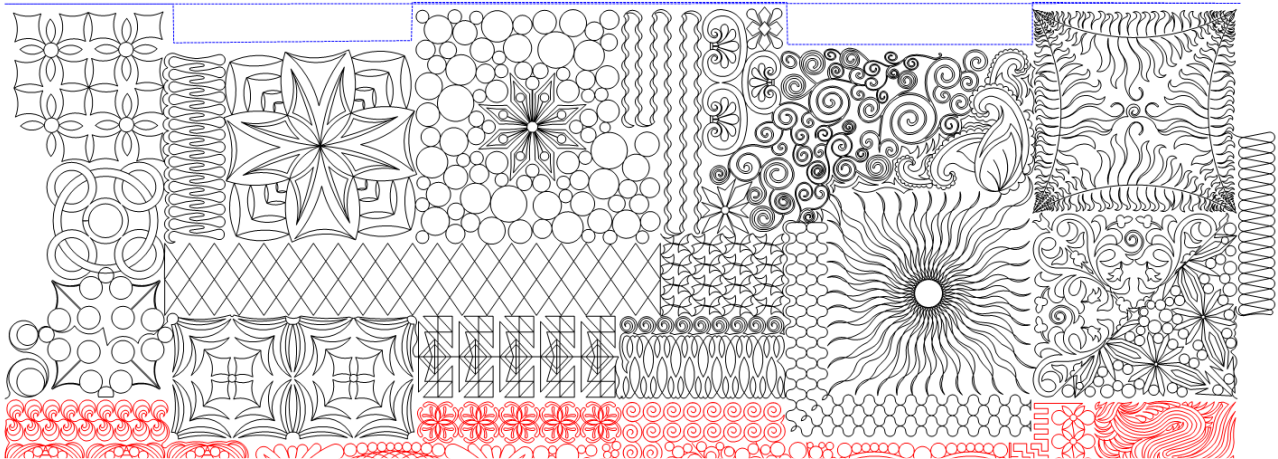
 Quilt.

Repeat this process until the entire quilt is done.

Considerations

There are some patterns which are truly designed to be used as background quilting (like these dream tangles), as opposed to being used as a regular edge-to-edge pattern. If you look at a pattern and wonder if the density of the pattern will overwhelm the quilt, then don't use it. Remember that just because our computer-guided machines are capable of that intense level of quilting doesn't necessarily mean that it's the best thing for the quilt.

Some patterns were initially designed to be used in a "whole cloth" application, either as an actual Whole Cloth Quilt or as background texture behind Raw Edge Applique (REA) on your longarm. Kim has used several of these types of patterns as background quilting for her show quilts, as have many other longarm quilters.

When in doubt about a pattern, always feel free to ask the pattern designer for their professional opinion about the suitability of a pattern for your purposes. If you do a "test run" of a pattern, keep in mind that all things need to be the same in the test as on your actual project.