

Weaving a Rag Rug on a Lightweight Loom by Gail Madden

How frustrating to own a wonderful, small loom and find that it is inadequate to weave a rag rug! No worries! It is possible; maybe not ideal, but possible. Much will depend on the loom you have. You will need to understand your loom and know how much to ask of it without causing abuse. This is so very important. There is no point in beating a perfectly good loom to death! If you are going to become a rug weaver and not just weave an occasional small rug, do think of buying a more suitable loom.

However, if you do wish to use a small, lightweight loom, there are various things you can do. Probably the first and most helpful is to weight the loom so that it doesn't move around so easily. I have found a very satisfactory solution for my Schacht Baby Wolf and some other looms with braces that run across the back close to the floor. You can lay a tube of sand across the brace making an inexpensive and easy solution. These sandbags can be found in hardware and lumber stores (particularly in the fall and winter in my part of the world where we have snow and they are commonly purchased to add weight for traction). They are about 8" in diameter, 36" long, and weigh about 70 pounds. The tube is made of a fiberglass-type of cloth or whatever would safely contain the sand, if you'd wish to make one. With this weight, the loom is going to stay in one place. Just this one change will make the loom a lot more effective. It'll mean that when you beat in the weft all of the force will go into packing in the rags and part of it won't be lost in having the loom move. The tubes of sand should rest on the floor and not place a lot of the weight on the loom. This is shown fairly clearly in the photo.

Attaching the loom to the floor or bracing it against a wall so that it won't "travel" across the room, is better done when you are building or remodeling a studio and make the appropriate accommodations for this.

I find it a bit more difficult to install weight to the beaters of smaller looms; however, it's possible to Velcro or fasten some exercise weights to each end of the beater. You can get inventive about what you use and how it is attached; best to use something that isn't too bulky but has a fair amount of weight for its size. Just adding a few pounds could help. If you do have a somewhat larger loom, it should work to mount a metal plate, pipe or a rod to the beater. My variation of the heavy piece of metal fastened to the bottom or back of the beater often mentioned in rug-weaving books doesn't interfere with the beater and is unobtrusive. I mounted a 3/4"-diameter solid steel rod underneath the beater of my 36"-wide loom with two 3/4" conduit clamps from the electrical department at the hardware store. The materials are inexpensive, and they can be mounted so they can easily be removed. Check the width of the shuttlerace and possible interference with other parts of the loom as you move the beater before you do this installation. If you do not have a sturdy beater, be cautious about the changes you are making.

There is another aspect to weaving rugs on a lightweight loom that you should consider - it has to do with your weft and the structure. I have recommended various techniques that have helped my students weave rag rugs using looms that weren't particularly

suitable. Two narrow strips of rags rather than one wide one are much easier to beat in tightly. Rag rugs made with blue jeans are wonderful but are more difficult to beat. If they are old, worn and very soft (but still in good condition), they should work. Or, if you want the look and aren't trying to recycle old jeans, you might use chambray. Heavy decorator or upholstery fabrics will present problems similar to the denim. Old sheets that have been used and washed have a wonderful soft look and will beat in like a dream. Being aware of the softness of new fabric and perhaps a few washings will get rid of the sizing and make it a lot more friendly to use. Soft T-shirt knits or loopers might also be good choices.

You might also take into account the warp you are using. We are finding that the poly/cotton 8/4 rug warp is somewhat stretchier than the 100% cotton 8/4 rug warp. With this in mind, there will be a tendency for the rug to stretch out during the weaving process. Once the weaving is done and the rug is allowed to relax, it should tighten up a bit. This allows the rug to tighten up a little without any extra beating.

The other thought to consider is the structure. For example, a twill will beat in far tighter than plain weave. Also, the use of a temple or stretcher should be helpful. Be observant of your equipment, materials and loom. If there are a lot of rag weaving projects in your future, keep an eye out for a new loom that would be more suitable. Hopefully, you will be able to find ways to weave an occasion rag rug or rag placemats and still have a happy loom that works well for you and enables you to create some beautiful rugs.

