

I began sewing on a machine in the late 60's and really came to know the ins and outs of a machine in the early '70s. My perspective is influenced by this experience. To me (and many others, after some research) from '68 to '81 was the heyday of sewing machine production. Most all of the features you see on a modern machine were introduced from the '50s – 1981. Of course, with the miniaturization of computer circuit boards there are many more features on the latest machines and much more plastic. Back in the '70s, there was very little plastic on/in a sewing machine. The body was made of cast steel (later aluminum) and the gears and all the working internal parts were metal. (Some brands in the '70s did use plastic cams in a stack for the different stitches; after a decade or so, the plastic would crack, making the machine unusable.) These machines were easy to maintain and repair by the sewer. Too many machines today, are simply a plastic clamshell with circuit boards glued to the inside of the shell. Yes, many people love their computerized machines, but unless you spend more than \$1,500 you will have a hard time finding a machine that is durable and has the power to handle variable sewing conditions. Try to avoid the special deals on machines under \$200 at the discount and big box stores (think of these as disposable machines). An average new machine will cost \$250 - \$700, and on the upper end, from \$700 – to well over \$3,000. You can also buy an excellent vintage machine for under \$150, but with all of these machines you must try before buy. Purchase a full size machine for your child; not a mini- or toy-like machine. This is a household tool/appliance.

I hesitate to recommend brands, because everyone has their favorites, and every brand has their lemons. I have over 25 machines, and the majority are either Janome or Kenmore. I adore particular models of Kenmores from the '70s. Most of the machines in my studio are Janome. Janome manufactured Kenmore machines from the early '80s until 2009, when Sears stopped selling machines with the Kenmore badge. Before 1980, Kenmores were made in Japan. Janome is the largest manufacturer of consumer sewing machines world-wide. Many household brand names are actually manufactured by Janome. If your machine later needs a repair, you will want one with readily available replacement parts.

Think long-term, and buy the best possible machine you can for your budget. If you have less than \$250 to spend, then try to find the best used/reconditioned machine from a reputable dealer at that price. Try out different machines. It is like shopping for a car. Consider how often and for what purpose the machine would be used for. Consider looking at estate sales or a reputable Sew and Vac store that refurbishes and sells trade-ins. Ask neighbors if a grandmother has a machine to sell. Again, try before you buy. Bring a needle, thread, and some fabric to run the machine through its paces (if the machine doesn't have a zigzag foot, bobbin and bobbin case, then forget it). If you aren't sure how much sewing you will do, then it is probably better to wait on your purchase. Use the machines at a studio, or try to borrow from a friend or family member. This is an investment purchase. The sewing machine manual has a wealth of knowledge.

For most any sewing situation, this is what to look for in a machine that will provide years of use, and require little maintenance if used properly and kept clean and dust-free:

6 - 20 basic built-in stitches that are selected with a knob or dial, electronic or mechanical controls (most sewing requires only the **straight stitch!**) – Don't get excited by the bells and whistles of lots of stitches; all you really need to do is straight, zigzag and reverse

Automatic built-in 4-step, preferred (or one-step buttonhole)

Separate stitch length and stitch width dials

Adjustable pressure foot

Manual tension adjustment

Free-arm conversion, well-lit work area (with minimal shadows)

Ability to drop the feed dogs or free-motion stitching or darning

Ability to move the needle position

As much metal construction as possible (open up the face plate and look inside)

Zipper foot, buttonhole foot, satin stitch foot, overcast foot, and blind hem foot

Ability to use a double needle

Stretch stitch options

Carrying handle and if possible a hard cover case, also, look for a machine that feels heavy for its size

A .6 amp motor if possible (most motors today range from .4 - .65 amps), Many vintage machines have 1.0+ amp motors.

This is a [list of mid-range Janomes that I recommend](#) (some are retired but still available online or at dealers):

Magnolia 7318 or 7325

Sewist 500 or 525LE

MS5027LEPR

Schoolmate S3023

HD3000

Also, take a look at Baby Lock, Bernina, Juki, Pfaff, Viking, and Elna. Again, please try before purchasing. Many of these brands specialize in top-level machines, but have branded low-budget machines that have no relationship to the quality of their top-shelf machines. Go to the different dealers and test drive their machines. Again, **avoid purchasing at discount and big box stores**. You can find great bargains online from reputable dealers, but know before you buy, read the warranty, return policy, service agreements and fine print. Again, don't purchase a machine for its name.