

Buying a New Embroidery Machine

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My beloved old workhorse, the Brother PR600, has been showing its age for a while now, and it's developed a host of issues: the needle threader doesn't work, the picker device malfunctions, and the bobbin cover is now held in place with duct tape and elastic.



As annoying as these mechanical failures are, at least the machine is still stitching.



But I fear bigger problems are on the horizon, because its electronic components are also aging, and there's no work-around when those start to fail. They just have to be replaced.

And there's the problem. Brother has discontinued support for the PR600, which means that parts are all but impossible to find, as I discovered the hard way last year when my touch screen failed.

It took me months to find a replacement. None of the dealers could source the part, and when I did twice find what I was assured was the correct screen, it turned out to be the wrong one. (My first-generation PR600 takes a unique screen, different from the 600II or 600C and all later 600 models, and those are absolutely out of production.)



After months of searching, I finally did locate an old stock screen half a world away in Australia. We got it installed and my PR600 is working again . . . for now. But I know that inevitably there will be more electronic failures for which I simply won't be able to find replacements.

So: as much as I love the PR600 and would stay with it if I could, it just isn't realistic to imagine that it will serve me for too much longer. It's time.

The loss of technical support, the scarcity of parts, and the gradual failure of my aging machine, combined with the retirement of our only local repair tech, have kind of forced the issue: I need to replace my PR600.

Not surprisingly, my first thought was to look for another Brother. I started by looking at another 6-needle, so I would be able to use my existing hoops and hooping station. Most Canadian outlets were showing the Brother PR680W machine at a sale price of \$11999.99 (down from the original list of \$14,999.99) – but nobody seemed to have one in stock.

These things worried me a bit: the sale price suggests that the machine is on clearance, and possibly at the end of its production run. And I have a funny feeling that Brother may be phasing out the six-needle machines entirely.



Still thinking to stay with the Brother brand, I next considered the 10-needle, but the price of their current model – the PR1055X – is a heart-stopping, budget-wrecking \$24,999.00, plus taxes and shipping.

Even used, these machines run between \$8000 and \$12,000 – still an awful lot of money. And in any case, I'm always kind of dubious about buying electronic gadgets second-hand. But as it turned out, the point was moot anyway, since there were few used machines on offer, and none of them locally.

Although my original goal was to buy another Brother machine, the price made me start looking at other makes. I checked out a number of familiar brands on line – Janome, Babylock, Tajima – before coming across a machine I hadn't heard of before: the Fortever Halo X.

There were good reports about this newcomer to the market, so I looked a little more closely and viewed some video demos from Echidna Sewing in Australia. It sure seemed as though the machine had potential for my needs.

The Halo-X, like the PR1055-X, is a 10-needle machine, with a large hoop size (240x360mm, or 9.5x14" – slightly wider than the Brother). And like the PR1055X, it has a number of features that my first-generation PR600 lacks: a USB port (believe it or not, my PR600 uses floppy disks to transfer designs to the machine); larger hoop capability; a lighted sewing area; and a positioning laser.

It features a servo motor, which is good news; I'm not sure about the PR1055X, but the PR600 has a small motor that my tech warned me early on could be a potential weakness (though to be fair, I've never had an issue with the motor. Not yet).

The Halo-X comes complete with a metal stand, cap frame, and a thread winder – all costly extras for the Brother. Best of all, it uses a different thread-cutting technology, so there will be no troublesome picker issues.

Though the machine compares well with the Brother on these points, there are a couple of potentially significant differences.

First, the Halo has a smaller touch screen than the PR1055-X: 7" versus 10". That larger screen would be a definite plus, but since I'm used to the 7" PR600 screen, I think I'd be okay with that. You don't miss what you've never had.



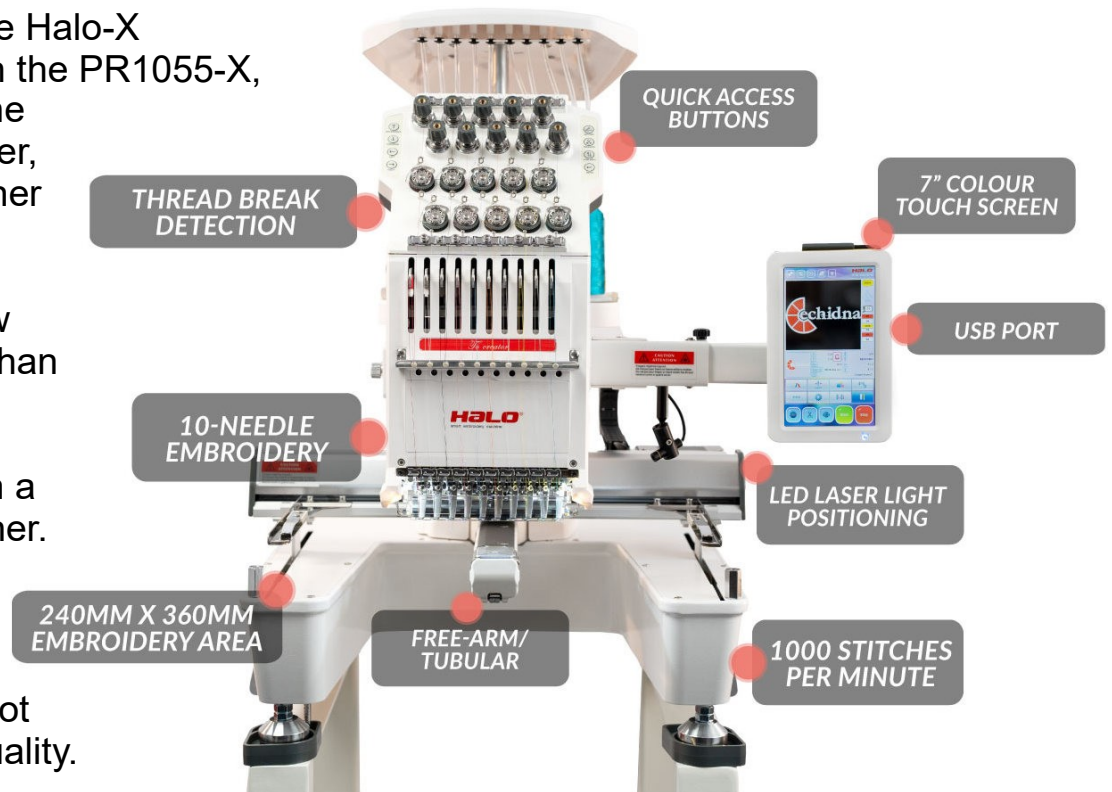
Second: no on-board designs. So far as I can tell from the brochures, the Halo has no built-in designs apart from its 36 on-board fonts (the PR1055X has 37, plus some 1000 additional designs, including frames). The built-ins are a strong selling point for the Brother line, especially for someone new to machine embroidery, but at this stage of my embroidery life, they aren't so much a factor for me. I already own a large design collection, including more than 12,000 of my own digitized designs, which are what I mostly stitch. In fact, it's possible that I wouldn't end up using the on-board designs at all, just as I never did use any of the ones that came with the PR600.



Finally, the Halo – like a lot of brands -- uses DST format rather than the PES format I'm used to. This isn't really a drawback, though it will require a bit of adaptation, since DST files don't store colour information like PES ones do. But now that I've finally let go of the idea of staying with the Brother brand, I'm ready to embrace the change, and I'm expecting the learning curve to be slight.

On most points, the Halo-X compares well with the PR1055-X, but where it won the day over the Brother, and over all the other brands I looked at, was on price: at \$6999.99 for a new machine, it's less than 1/3 the cost of the Brother 10-needle, and less even than a second-hand Brother. *Wow.*

And based on all I've seen about the Halo, it does not compromise on quality.



The upshot of all this: I bought the Halo.

The company I purchased it from – Eurotex Canada – has been responsive and helpful. I was even able to see the machine in operation as it stitched out one of my own digitized designs, via a video conference call with the sales manager.

And as it turns out, I got an even better deal than I could have hoped for. The machine I ended up purchasing was used briefly as a trade show demo. The all-in price for this demo machine, including taxes and shipping from Ontario, came to \$5550.00 – a lower figure than the \$8000 plus tax and shipping that I paid for my Brother PR600 back in 2005. (And if you translate to today's dollars, that \$8000 becomes something like \$13,200, so on that basis, my new machine is well under half the cost of the PR600.)

I'm very pleased. I'll be taking delivery of the machine later today, so hopefully I'll be up and stitching next week. I'll post a first-impression review once I've had a chance to do up some projects. I can't wait!