

"Retrobritening" Yellowed Plastic

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I have quite a few vintage sewing machines, and although most date to the first half of the 20th Century, my collection does include a few 70s models.

Some of those have plastic housings and cases, which unfortunately can turn an ugly dingy yellow over time, especially when exposed to UV light. I really dislike this discoloration, and was delighted to discover that there is a remedy, so I recently got busy with three of my machines -- a Singer Model 354 Genie and two Kenmore 158.1040 machines. Here's what they looked like before treatment.



The Genie was discolored all over, but on the Kenmores it was mostly the plastic accessory containers that were yellowed.

The body of these machines is paint on metal, so they weren't affected the same way, but the contrast made the discoloration look even worse.

To restore them to brightness -- "retrobrightening" as it's colloquially known -- requires a creme-style hydrogen peroxide bleach designed for use in hair salons.

To make this process work, you need at least a 30-volume solution, much stronger than the drugstore stuff. The one I used was 40-volume, and the 32 fl oz bottle cost me under \$10 at a beauty supply store.

Be sure to wear latex or vinyl gloves when handling the bleach and wash your hands afterward, because it **will** discolor clothes, hair, and even skin. My fingers went leprous white, though thank goodness the effect was temporary. Plus, the stuff can sting.

Apply the solution directly to the yellowed plastic using a brush, as evenly as you can -- try to avoid streaks or heavy areas, which will make the plastic lighten unevenly. Then cover the machine with plastic wrap or a large clear plastic bag to keep the bleach moist, and set it in sunlight for a few hours.

How long will depend on the time of year (the sun is stronger in summer) and on how much yellowing you need to correct. Check the item frequently to ensure it doesn't over-bleach -- every half hour in the summer -- then unwrap and wipe clean with a damp cloth.

See how much better my little Kenmore looks with the accessory box brightened?



I should mention that this treatment doesn't prevent the item from eventually yellowing again if exposed to UV light, but the results are quite startling when you consider how the machines look after treatment compared to how they looked before.



I'm not sure that these photos really do them justice, but hopefully the difference in the Genie is obvious, especially when you compare the restored front cover to the still-untreated back of the machine, shown at left.

For more detailed instructions, [check out this video](#) (not mine) or search "retrobriten" on youtube. The process works for other plastic appliances as well as sewing machines.