

Bead Encyclopedia 1: Seed Beads

By Valorie Clifton

Ah, seed beads! What is it about these tiny bits of glass that inspire such wonderful creativity? People have been fascinated with beads for millennia, from the times of crudely carved bone and shell beads to today's modern glass and crystal masterpieces. Seed beads allow for so many possibilities in design due to their small size and seemingly limitless color possibilities.

In addition to the wonderful color ranges available, seed beads also come in different shapes and sizes. Today, seed beads can be found in a variety of shapes including round, cylinder, drop, triangle, hexagon, and even cube shapes. **The term "seed bead" in today's world generally refers to most beads that are smaller than 3mm to 4mm in size.**



The most popular and sought-after seed beads are manufactured in Japan and the Czech Republic. They have the most uniform sizes and shapes, and are in high demand. Seed beads are also manufactured in Italy, France, India, and China. Not all seed beads are created equal.

Most Czech and Japanese seed beads are only available in specialty stores or in online marketplaces. Large retail outlet craft stores sell only a limited selection of these beads. Luckily, there are many online retailers that carry a full selection of these beads. Good quality Italian and French glass beads can also be found. They are generally more expensive and harder to find than the popular Czech and Japanese beads.

Chinese and Indian seed beads are among the cheapest made and poorest quality beads. Most "big box" craft stores will carry Chinese and Indian seed beads. These beads will be irregular in size and most often will need to be "culled" (sorted through for size and quality) prior to using them. They are suitable for beginners who are learning how to bead and who don't want to invest a large amount of money in the more expensive beads. However, in most instances, you get what you pay for.

In this class I will provide an overview of some of the most popular brands, sizes, shapes and finishes for seed beads. The photographs are of beads from my own, jealously guarded treasure trove.

Bead Sizes

Bead sizes are often denoted as having a degree symbol next to a number, such as 11°. It's more common to see the size referred to as "11s", "size 11", "11/0" or "11 aught" (sometimes mistakenly spelled "ought"). All references are correct and are interchangeable.

Unfortunately, despite efforts to standardize bead sizes, not all beads are created equal. As illustrated above, different types will be different sizes despite their having the same numerical size. As they say, size is relative.



For beads, ***the larger the number is, the smaller the bead.*** The most commonly used beads range in size from size 15° to size 6°. In this photo, the turquoise beads are size 15, the gold are size 11, the periwinkle are size 10, the green are size 8, and the pink are size 6.

Czech seed beads are available in a much wider range of sizes than Japanese beads. Beads from antiquity can even be found in size 32°! The most commonly used Japanese seed bead sizes are 8, 10, 11, and 15. The most commonly used Czech seed bead sizes are 8, 10, 11, 13, and 15.

Generally speaking, most beads larger than size 6 are considered “E beads.” Larger ones are also known as crow beads, trade beads, and pony beads. These look like seed beads—slightly cylindrical—but with thicker walls, large holes, and blunted ends.

For a good seed bead size chart detailing the sizes and hole sizes of common beads, see the Fire Mountain Gems website.

Types of Seed Beads

Delicas and Cylinder Beads

Japanese Cylinder beads are perhaps the most popular beads amongst modern beaders. These beads are cylindrical in shape with flush, flat ends and large center holes. They look similar to tiny tubes. They are renowned for their gorgeous colors and uniform shape and sizes. They require less culling and work wonderfully with geometric stitches such as peyote, loom work, brick stitch, square stitch and herringbone stitch. They are prized for graphed projects and applications where precision is desired.



The term “**Delica**” is erroneously used to refer to Japanese cylinder beads in general. However, Delica® is a brand name. Delicas are made by **Miyuki**, a Japanese manufacturer. They come in several sizes. Delica beads are cylindrical in shape with thin walls and large holes. The larger holes allow for more thread passes through the beads. The thinner walls allow for a greater quantity of beads per gram of weight. Miyuki manufactures a wide variety of beads, including **Magatamas** and **Tilas**. Miyuki’s website has a chart that showcases their bead shapes, sizes and styles.

Cylinder beads are also manufactured by two other Japanese companies, **Toho** and **Matsuno**. Toho’s cylinder beads look much the same as Delicas, but they are called **Treasures**. Toho also makes the much sought-after **Aikos**, which are arguably the most precisely cut, most uniform and most expensive cylinder beads available. Matsuno manufactures seed beads called **Dyna-Mites**, which appear to be cylindrical shaped but with rounder edges than the Delicas and Treasures.

Japanese beads usually come in small tubes or in larger bags as loose beads. They are almost never pre-strung.



Czech Seed Beads

Czech seed beads are high-quality, slightly squashed, and softly rounded seed beads. They are often mistakenly thought of as having an irregular size and shape. However, seed beads that come from quality manufacturers such as **Preciosa Ornela** are extremely uniform in size and shape. In my experience, they are more consistent than Japanese round seed beads.

Czech beads are wonderful for strung and embroidered designs. They lend themselves very nicely to traditional Native American designs, circular beaded projects, beaded ropes, and stitches such

as herringbone, netting, bead crochet, right angle weave, and any application where a softer, flowy, organic look is desired.

Unlike Japanese beads, Czech beads come in hanks. Hanks generally consist of twelve 21-inch long strands of beads that are folded in half and tied together.

Japanese Rounds, Japanese Cylinders, and Czech Rounds

The three most popular types of seed beads vary in size and shape. For this reason, it's not always appropriate to substitute brands or types of beads in patterns—they are not necessarily interchangeable. For instance, I would not recommend substituting Toho beads with Preciosa Czech beads.

In this photo, the beads are all size 11. The green beads are Toho round seed beads. The amber beads are Miyuki Delica cylinder beads. The bronze beads are Preciosa Czech round (aka Rocaille) seed beads. Note how the green ones are taller than the other two beads. While the Delicas are taller than the Czech beads, the Czech beads have a larger diameter. As illustrated, having the incorrect type of bead for a project will greatly affect the quality of the final product.



Generally speaking, Japanese cylinder beads and Czech round seed beads are smaller than Japanese round seed

beads. Czech beads are generally smaller than other beads, partly due to their shape, which is rounder and sort of squashed or “donut” shaped. Japanese round seed beads are more cylindrical but feature softly rounded edges, as opposed to the blunter, sharper edges of cylinder beads (such as Delicas or Treasures).



Beadwork created with Japanese beads has a more precise, geometric look than beadwork created with Czech beads, which presents a softer, more organic appearance.

Charlottes and True Cuts

Charlottes and True Cuts, also known as “1-cut” beads, are Czech seed beads that have one facet ground into their side, giving one side of the bead a flat appearance. This creates a subtle glimmer or sparkle in a finished piece. Charlottes are actually “True Cut” beads in a size 13. However, most people erroneously refer to any “1-cut” bead as a Charlotte. According to Shipwreck Beads, Charlottes come in smaller hanks of twelve 12-inch strands.





Hex Beads

Seed beads also come in hexagon shapes! These are wonderful for imparting texture to flatwork like peyote and herringbone projects. Hex beads are cylindrical with faceted sides. They are also commonly called “2-cuts.” They come in sizes ranging from size 15 to size 6.

Modern hex beads are manufactured in Japan and the Czech Republic. They can also be found in antique bead markets from Venetian and French bead manufacturers.

Triangles

Triangle beads, like hex beads, offer the opportunity to add texture to beaded projects. Triangles are great for embellishing the edges of beadwork. They are also great for fringe work. They come in a wide variety of finishes.

Miyuki manufactures softly rounded triangle beads in sizes 5, 8, and 10. They also manufacture “sharp triangles,” like the ones shown, in sizes 5, 8, and 10.

Toho also manufactures triangle beads in sizes 11 and 8.



Cube Beads

Cube beads are another option for added texture in beaded projects. They are versatile and can be used in flatwork such as peyote, herringbone, and loom work. They also make nice accent or fringe beads.

Toho manufactures cube beads. They are available in 1.5mm, 2mm, 3mm, and 4mm sizes.

Miyuki also manufactures cube beads—or “square beads”—that are available in 1.8mm, 3mm, and 4mm sizes.

Preciosa manufactures larger cube beads that aren’t considered “seed beads.” They range from 5.5mm to 10mm in size.

Fringe Beads

Fringe beads are tiny, raindrop-shaped beads. They are commonly referred to as “drops” and “fringe drops.” They are used to embellish the edges of beadwork. They create a little fringe, thus the name. They can also hang at the base of longer fringes. I’ve seen them used effectively in spiral ropes and peyote stitch projects to add dimension to otherwise flat work. They can also be used as little petals and stamens in beaded flowers.

Fringe beads like the ones here are manufactured by Miyuki. They are available in sizes 2.8mm and 3.4mm. They are available in a large range of sizes, colors, and finishes.

Toho makes drops called Magatamas (oddly enough, Miyuki also manufactures Magatamas). They are available in 3mm, 4mm, and 5mm sizes.

Matsuno manufactures drop beads in 3.4mm size.

Czech drops are larger, ranging in sizes from 4x6mm upward to larger beads.



Bugle Beads

Most people consider bugle beads as seed beads, so I’m including them in this overview. Bugle beads come in a huge variety of sizes, shapes, colors and finishes. They can be metallic, pearlized, and even glow-in-the-dark (I own some!). They can be twisted, faceted, spiral-shaped, and hex-shaped. I’ve seen “half bugles” and super long bugles.

Bugle beads are most commonly used in bead embroidery, spiral ropes, bead loom work, and fringe work. Although I own a large collection, I rarely use them with anything other than good, strong thread. Bugle beads are sharp and can easily cut thread.

Seed Bead Finishes

Seed beads (and most other beads) come in a myriad of finishes. I’ve taken sample photos of some of my favorite finishes.

Opaque Beads

They are widely available in most any bead store or website. They are manufactured all over the world, by Japanese and Czech manufacturers, and also by Chinese, European, and Indian companies.

Opaque seed beads are a solid color. The color is normally the actual color of the glass and is very durable.





Transparent Beads

Transparent beads are colored glass that allow light to pass through them. Like opaque beads, the actual glass is colored, which makes the color durable.

Aurora Borealis aka “AB” Finish

Aurora Borealis finish on seed beads is generally a silver-based color finish (almost a glaze) that gives off an iridescent effect, displaying mostly pink and silver effects. For larger beads, the AB coating is usually only applied to one side of the bead. AB is one of the most popular bead finishes. The finish is usually durable.

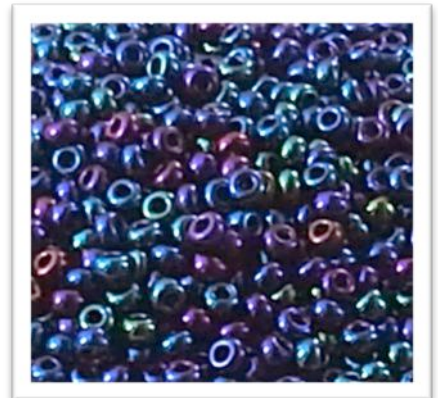


Iris Finish

Iris finish is similar to AB finish except that it’s generally heavier and darker and displays mainly purple, green, gold, and blue hues. Iris finish can change the overall color of a bead. For example, the photograph shows “red iris” beads, which look more purple and pink than red. This finish is normally durable.

Iris AB Finish

These beads are an example of a blend of Iris and AB finishes. The result is a softer purple hue to the blue beads, creating a popular “peacock” effect.



Matte Iris Finish

As you can see, Iris blends are popular with bead manufacturers. These are iris with a matte finish. The purple and gold hues are still apparent but the high gloss finish is missing.

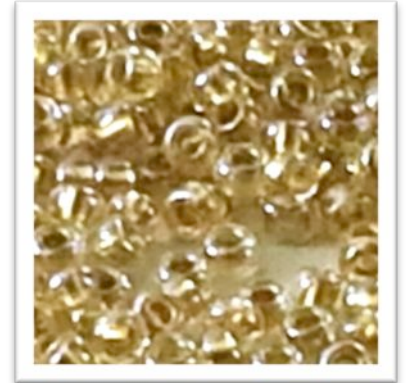


Metallic Finish

Metallic beads are very popular. The problem with metallic finishes is that they aren't very durable. I'm fond of Preciosa Czech seed beads in metallic finishes (and metallic Iris finishes). Their finishes are fairly durable, but if the beads are handled roughly the finish will come off. Miyuki manufactures a line of galvanized finishes, which are supposed to be durable. With metallic finishes, you get what you pay for. Cheaper beads are not worth the time and effort. I speak from experience!

Gold-Lined Beads

An option to the outer metallic coating is to purchase metal-lined beads. The effect isn't the same but the finish is less likely to rub off. I have found, though, that silver and gold-lined beads can tarnish on the inside and darken beadwork. The photo shows gold-lined "luster" seed beads.

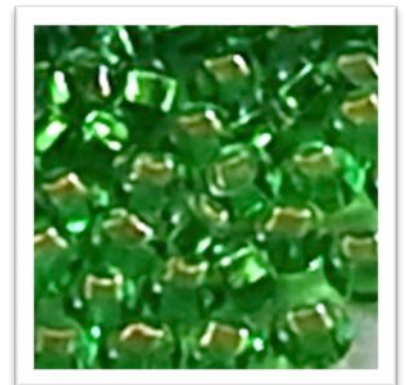


Silver-Lined Beads

There are also silver, copper and bronze-lined beads. Perhaps the most popular, metal-lined beads are silver-lined beads. Silver-lined beads are bright and offer extra glimmer to beaded projects.

Square-Holed, Silver-Lined Beads

Beads with square holes are extra sparkly, especially when paired with silver lining. It gives the appearance of facets inside the seed beads. The holes are also larger, allowing more thread passes through these beads. I own quite a few of these gems in a range of colors.



Color-Lined Beads

Color-lined beads are usually clear or transparent colored beads that have a colored paint inside the holes. The quality depends on the manufacturer. I'm not a big fan of color-lined beads so I have just a few colors.

Matte Finish Beads

Matte-finished beads have no gloss or shine. They are also referred to as “etched” or “frosted.” This texture may be less smooth than normal polished beads. Matte beads can add a lot of elegance to beaded projects.



“Ceylon” or Pearl Finish

Ceylon finishes have a pearlescent appearance. The finish is not extremely durable. Like metallic finishes, the durability depends on the quality of the beads and the manufacturer. The ones pictured are from Preciosa Ornela and the finish is good.



Matte Ceylon

Another interesting blend is matte Ceylon or matte pearl. There is a slight sheen that is not found in regular matte beads.



Picasso Finish

Picasso finishes are becoming very popular with modern beaders. A Picasso finish is a mottled finish on top of a bead. The most popular ones are brownish to mimic stones, but Picasso finishes can be any color.



Unfinished, Un-tumbled Beads

I was very fortunate to run across some antique, unfinished beads. They are also referred to as “glass trade beads.” These have not undergone the final polishing step (“tumbling”). They still have the powder on the insides from the bead mandrels.

These particular beads are over 100 years old. Unfinished beads are slightly roughened like matte finished beads. I thought they merited

a mention—as far as I know, they are only available through antique bead suppliers. Check Shipwreck Beads—they purchased a turn-of-the-century bead factory full of beads, and sell vintage and antique Venetian and French beads).

Review Questions

- 1) What is an advantage of the square-holed silver-lined beads?
 - a) They don't move around on the thread.
 - b) They are better for peyote stitch.
 - c) They add a faceted effect and sparkle to your work.
 - d) None of the above

- 2) True/False. Delica is a trademarked name for cylindrical beads from Miyuki.
 - a) True
 - b) False

- 3) Which of the following is a teardrop shape?
 - a) Iris finish
 - b) Fringe bead
 - c) Bugle

- 4) True/False. The smaller the number, the larger the bead. (example, 6° is larger than a 15° bead)
 - a) True
 - b) False

- 5) Which of the following is a disadvantage of a Ceylon or pearlescent bead?
 - a) The finish is not as durable
 - b) It's so shiny it can cause vision damage
 - c) It's very delicate and may break more easily