at some point in the last 6 months or so I started using thicker threads like pearl cotton in my work. I’d either unwind a skein of DMC floss or pearl cotton onto an old empty cone or spool, wind that into the bobbin, and do bobbinwork machine embroidery with it…. there are a lot of advantages: i primarily use typical size #40 and #60 threads of all sorts, so the thicker threads really pop off the surface of the work and give me the opportunity to really play with the texture of the surface…..the thicker threads also take up surface area at a much faster rate of sewing(area / stitches per minute????) this is good for me because the large work i’ve been doing takes a LONG TIME(current piece 3 months and counting of working 7 days a week) - and i’ll take any opportunity to go faster / harder / etc…. 

SO - after tiring of spending too much money on precious little balls of pearl cotton(they are like little desserts) - i just started dyeing my own thread that i could get cheaply in an uncolored state…. 

this 'guide' is not meant to be comprehensive, or technical, or really useful at all. it’s a way for me to make notes for myself to keep, but also to share my thread dyeing endeavors with other knitters, sewers, bookmakers, or whomever wants to play with thread…. 

i apologize for the poor quality of the photographs. the images do not capture some of the special qualities of these hand-dyed threads…

i hope that someone finds this useful or interesting..feedback is always welcome (hollinx@gmail.com)
I purchased this cheap skein winder on ebay.

Good skein winders are expensive, but they sometimes have yardage counters and can be adjustable....

Whatever - this works. I wind a skein of thread or yarn - usually about 100-200 yards....

Once the thread is wound I tie knots with a separate polyester thread (poly doesn’t take my dye) in four places to keep the skein from coming apart and tangling in the dyebath.

You can use any kind of thread that takes dye.

I use regular rayon embroidery thread, all purpose cheapish coats and clark mercerized cotton thread, pearl cotton, wooly nylon serger thread, heavy-duty nylon upholstery thread, cotton crochet yarn (size 3, which is pretty thick, is about as thick as I can get in a bobbin), viscose crochet yarn, etc...

The big package of unbleached yarn in the picture is something I found at the scrap-exchange, a great little store in Durham, NC which sells a lot of stuff tossed away by big industries and other businesses - I always find great thread there.

Halycon yarn online sells some beautiful lace-weight yarns for knitting/weaving that I imagine would dye beautifully.
I primarily use RIT dye. It's cheap, available, and simple.

I occasionally use the more complicated fiber reactive dyes for cotton & rayon. For this you have to be careful, because these dyes SHOULD be mixed under a fan hood with safety glasses, gloves, and a respirator on. NEVER bring these dyes in the kitchen. I don't really like to mess with these dyes because of the chemicals involved, but they make some beautiful colors, so I will make some stock solutions (I eyeball since I don't have a scale) outside on my deck. Dharma Trading has supplies & tutorials for dyeing with fiber reactive dyes....

I dye in old coffee cans and pickle jars. Skeins are small - so I don't need any big vats or anything like that.... the cans do rust, so that could have an impact on the dye chemistry - but I haven't had any problems so far.
Here I'm dyeing a skein of mercerized cotton all-purpose sewing thread with a skein of viscose bamboo crochet yarn.

Wash & rinse the skeins in warm water with a dab of dish soap. This lightly 'scours' the material and lowers the surface tension, allowing the dye to penetrate the fiber...

I often allow the skeins to soak in hot water a few minutes....

In this case I’m trying for a light fuchsia shade, so I’ve added about 1/2 a teaspoon of RIT liquid dye to about 2 cups of hot water....
after about one minute of immersion...

after about five minutes of immersion...

So, the skeins were looking darker than I had hoped, so I removed the skeins after 10 minutes or so of immersion in the dye bath. Rinse thoroughly in cold water...

....and lie out to dry.

Once these are dry & I get a better look at the saturation of the color- I’ll make my next step. To lighten I can soak in a bleach/water solution, or I can keep dying the thread.  

For VERY DARK shades I use more dye, hot water, and more time....
Here are the dried skeins.

Once dyed, you have more options…

The next 2 steps will demonstrate painting dye on the already dyed skein of cotton sewing thread.

Direct application of multiple dye colors straight from the bottle.

Image isn’t great, but once the dye dries and is rinsed, you can see the streaks of color throughout the skein.
To use the threads - put the skein back on skein winder, clip the knots, and wind the thread off onto a cone or spool. As you can see from the picture - I’ve made my own spools from paper and duct tape in addition to the many empty cones I have around....

Dyeing thread doesn’t get really interesting until you start to really play with the colors. You can stick one end of a skein in purple & the other in yellow. You can paint dye directly onto the yarn. You can bleach out a section of color and over-dye a brand new color. Really, just mess around.....

For the rest of this guide I’ll show you some of my own experiments with dyeing and coloring thread.
So I have this huge package of 2-ply cotton yarn - which from the looks of it is used for the weaving of heavy duty cotton duck cloth. Since I have so much of it, I decided to experiment with ways to scour & bleach the yarn before dyeing...in the hopes that i can ‘brighten’ the yarn to get a wider range of shades...

There is a huge difference in the appearance of the skeins after the initial processes. After being dyed- not so much. I will try this experiment again trying a lighter shade to see what difference that makes....
IN ACTION

dyed threads
If a cone is running low like the one pictured, I like to pull out my box of copic markers and color up the thread.

It looks cheesy, but it makes for a situation where you don’t have a great idea of how the thread is going to look when stitched....this is fun.

Looks good!