

03. Selecting Strings

Selecting strings for an instrument is a trial and error effort with personal preferences. Many factors effect the tonal sound quality of an instrument. An inexpensive instrument can sound good or bad just as an expensive instrument can sound good or bad. An instrument can also sound good to one person and not so good to another. Picking out a set of strings is a final step in seeking the sound you prefer.

Ukuleles and guitars usually have wooden bodies with fixed-in-place bridges that are not adjustable so the strings are the only variables. Banjoes and banjos on the other hand have movable bridges and plastic or calfskin heads that effect adjusting the tuning and sound quality. It's most important to make sure the bridge is properly positioned on the head and the head is correctly tightened before tuning and experimenting with string selection.

I play a 4-string plectrum banjo and I preferred using Gibson SBG-571 string sets with wound 3^d & 4th strings. It's almost impossible to find these string sets today so I have settled on the GHS PF-180 M 5-string sets that have a mellower sound than the "lighter" string sets. These sets are readily available and I can always find them on the internet for around \$4/set. Plectrum sets are not common so I use these and trash the unused 5th string. You have to make sure the string end that connects to the tail piece is the correct type. They can be either looped, ferruled or plain and only the correct type will work on an instrument. Another concern might be the string length but if you buy the correct string set for the instrument that should not be a problem. The factory string sets have pre-selected gauges so when they are all properly tuned the string tensions are closely matched.

You should also change the complete set of strings should one break or if they haven't been changed for some time. I change mine routinely every six months because they do lose tonal quality over time and risk breakage.

Strings can be changed quickly and easily if you simply wrap the end 3 times around the tuning nut then pass the end through the hole in the nut and pull it tight. Tune the string to make sure it doesn't slip then cut off the loose end leaving about 1-2 inches sticking out. If you are changing all the strings change one string at a time until all are changed so the bridge will remain in place. Note that the strings are always counted from the bottom up when holding the instrument in playing position. The 1st string is the highest tone, the lowest tone is the 4th string. The short G string on a 5-string banjo is the 5th string.

Baritone Ukulele: (4-string set) strings 1,2 &3 are nylon the 4th is wound bronze.
Use guitar [d-g-b-e] or plectrum banjo [c-g-b-d] tuning.

Banjolele: (4-string ukulele set) Same as tenor ukulele..
Use ukulele [g-c-e-a] tuning.

Tenor Banjo: (4-string tenor set)
Use tenor banjo tuning [g-c-d-a] or Irish tenor tuning [g-d-a-e]. Can also use guitar or plectrum tuning using corresponding strings.

Plectrum Banjo: (4 & 5 string banjo set)
Blue Grass Banjo [g-d-g-b-d], Double C [g-c-g-c-d] or C tuning [g-c-g-b-d].
Guitar tuning (also called Chicago tuning) [d-g-b-e].
Plectrum tuning [c-g-b-d].

4-string plectrum sets are hard to find but you can always use the first 4 strings of a 5-string set and discard the unneeded 5th string (the first 4-strings are the same as 4-string plectrum sets).

Tenor ukulele: Use Aquila strings and tune them often when new because they will stretch.
4-string [g-c-e-a] some ukulele players use an octave lower wound bronze g-string.
6-string [g-c-c-e-a-a] the c-c & a-a pairs are an octave apart (low c & high c, low a & high a).