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ECO-FRIENDLY FABRICS

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ECOSTYLE

Delia Montgomery

GETTING the basics for natural and organic living includes earth-friendly fabrics and yarns. Goods from suppliers are expanding almost as fast as organic foods, yet naysayers ask, "why bother?"

There are many reasons to overcome fashion's destructive downside. Dye and mordant toxins, polluted wastewater, and cheap sweatshop labor for production are a few examples. Fortunately, positive and innovative changes make 2007 fabric choices exciting. Avanti is a Japanese company that purchases most of its organic cotton from Texas. They offer a couple of cool new fabrics this year. Recycled organic cotton waste makes for plain and denim knits with a popular vintage look. Then there's a revolutionary fake-fur and soft-touch fabric made from Supima. That's a licensed trademark name for American Pima cotton. The cotton hair has a natural wave created without chemicals and the result truly looks like fur.

Continuum Textiles is a sales agency representing textiles and garments from environmentally responsible supply chains. Their partners have decades of experience in organic cotton, merino wool and the textile business. i-merino is about three years old, but a recent discovery to many. It may be the most sustainable performance activewear fabric on the planet. i-merino is the brainchild of a fourth-generation merino wool grower and first-generation snow boarder, Stuart Adams, who is the founder and managing director of Continuum. As a devotee of numerous sport and physical activities, Stuart experienced first hand the superior performance characteristics and comfort of merino wool. Merino is a renewable resource where a new fleece grows on the sheep's back every year. The wool is obtained without harm to the animal. From farm to fabric, the process is fully tracked and certified, so you are guaranteed the wool passes stringent environmental, social and quality controls.

i-cotton, also promoted by Continuum, gives businesses and consumers the opportunity to choose products that support sustainable farming. i-cotton yarns and fabrics incorporate five percent organic cotton and 95 percent sustainably farmed cotton. While five percent may not seem like much, it can have a big impact. Companies that consume large volumes of cotton choose to blend five percent organic as a way to support the growth of organic farming while meeting their own price and supply needs. As more companies adopt this model, the total volume of organic cotton goes a long way. Like icing on the cake, Continuum offers Meritton fabrics. This is a unique blend of i-merino and organic cotton. The Meritton fabric has a superb drape and handle, is machine washable and tumble dryable. Most importantly, it captures the distinctive performance properties of two very popular natural fibers through certified farming systems - voila, an environmentally positive material with great comfort.

Ecofibre Industries is into hemp. They hold new technology research to reduce the cost of fiber production up to 30 percent. Their field processing unit is prepared for a patent to pick up stalk in the field, chop it as per first stage processing, and enable it to be modularized. Similar to cotton, the process enables bulk handling of hemp modules rather than bales, which are inefficient and expensive. The research enables them to assess whether the quality is affected and to what extent the fiber produced from the pilot processing unit suits existing and new markets. Improved efficiency, lower power requirements, higher capacity, and cost savings all look promising.

Alternatively, Indra Imports treasures ancient and traditional methods of producing hemp fabrics. The U.S. company imports from seven Asian countries to supply hemp stores across the globe. Their fabrics made in Thailand prove no two bolts alike. Most of the hemp used in Thailand is grown in Laos and China, as it is difficult for people of northern Thailand to cultivate the plant. But they take the raw dried plants and soften the fiber to be able to make the threads and weave them into this most amazing fabric. They dye the fabric themselves using old and original techniques. The company also offers silk yarn

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hand spun in Nepal from remnant fibers that are harvested and recycled from the weaving mills in India.

Most fabric distributors are jumping into soybean and bamboo materials. The fibers blend well with conventional cotton and spandex, but get ready for organic invasion. Bonnie Siefers of Jonano, a division of Sami Designs, put ecoKashmere® on the map this year. Bamboo fabrics are now included in collections at Material ConneXion's four libraries in New York, Bangkok, Cologne and Milan. That's the world's leading knowledge base for information about new and innovative materials. Now ecoKashmere can be accessed by Fortune 100 companies, architects, designers, and more.

What about recycling synthetics? Carnegie RVC is an international company that serves interior designers and architects who respect the environment. They offer materials in every category from windows to seating and walls. Kudos for recent and conscientious manufacturing to develop a product line that is free of chlorine, stabilizers, PVCs and plasticizers. For example, there is a wide selection of upholstery and panel fabrics manufactured from recycled polyester. Question is if this new fabric development is a process kind to earth.

Fact is all polyester is manufactured from petroleum products. Polyester is recyclable from two different sources. First, postconsumer polyester is made from waste material left over once a consumer has used a product. Examples are soda and water bottles. Secondly, there's postindustrial polyester which is derived from waste generated by an industrial process before consumer use.

The Carnegie site explains that the primary benefits of using recycled polyester are less waste going to landfills and less demand for petroleum products. With less demand, there are fewer environmental impacts from the processing of the petroleum into virgin polyester. They claim that products made from recycled polyester perform the same high standards as virgin polyesters, and cost the same. Finally, recycled polyester fabrics are continuously recyclable.

Design Tex Fabrics is a company that considers themselves a leader in sustainable materials. In addition to fabrics, they offer paneling, rugs, wallcovering, window blinds, and window shades. Methods of resource conservation and waste reduction are conscientious manufacturing to develop a product line that is free of chlorine, stabilizers, PVCs and plasticizers. For example, there is a wide selection of upholstery and panel fabrics manufactured from recycled polyester. Question is if this new fabric development is a process kind to earth.

Keep in mind that materials developed by environmentally positive standards in one region of the world may differ from others. Debates over purity are expected to continue, but undeniably, there is much improvement for 2007 buyers to boast about.

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