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Members Only

American Sewing Guild **Notions**

## Go Green! Sew Green!

by Samina Mirza

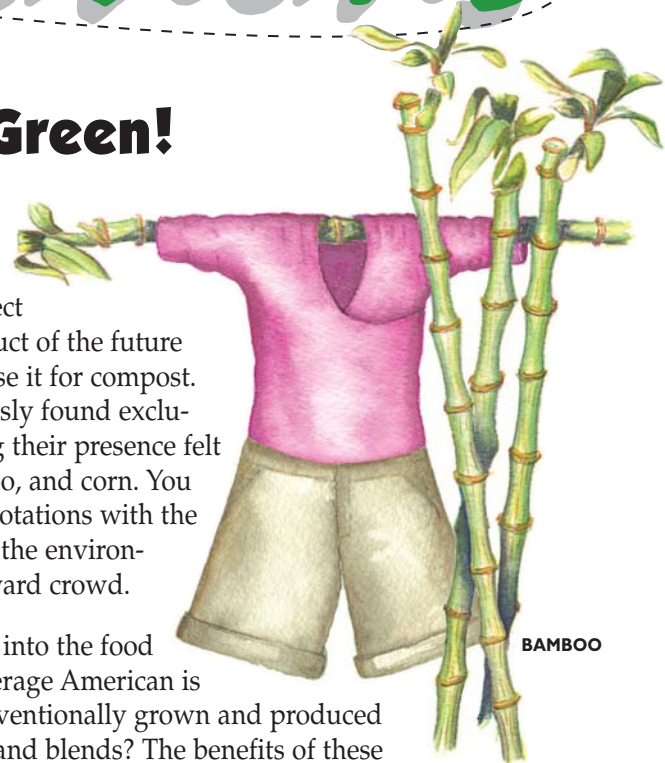
**T**ofu T-shirts and corn couture... the terms evoke images of a "Project Runway" challenge, or a lifestyle product of the future where you can eat your clothing—or use it for compost. But the reality is that materials previously found exclusively in the culinary world are making their presence felt in the fashion world. Think soy, bamboo, and corn. You can also discard previously seedy connotations with the word hemp. Hemp is now a darling of the environmentally friendly and fashionably forward crowd.

Why the excursion into the food world when the average American is happy wearing conventionally grown and produced cottons, synthetics, and blends? The benefits of these newly popular fibers have to do with concerns about saving the environment from pollution and minimizing detrimental effects on the global climate and population. Increases in weather catastrophes and wildlife and rain forest changes, which all affect the human condition, are attributed to global warming, which is the result of carbon emissions into the environment. A significant portion of these emissions is caused by the textile industry.

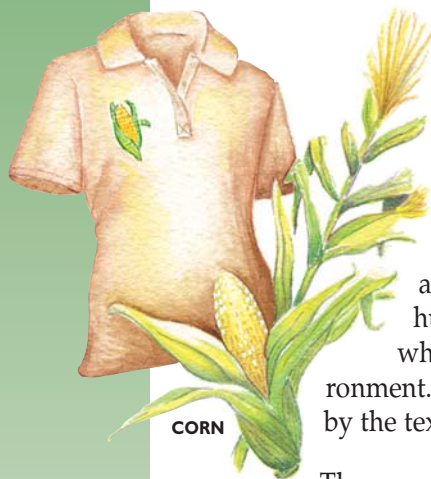
The green movement is beginning to take root in lifestyles around the world, where there is a serious demand for apparel made of fabrics with properties of biodegradability, sustainability, and eco-sensitive manufacturing. While mainstream America is just now beginning to pay attention to what an eco-friendly lifestyle has to offer, Europeans are far ahead of us in actually demanding the goods and changing their behavior patterns to reflect their environmental leanings.

### Green Is Beautiful

Gone are the days when organically grown fabric meant a dull beige, no-style jersey. With "green" technology and processes making advances in the textile industry, more and more big names in the fashion industry are designing beautiful apparel using organically produced fabrics. Think Oscar de la Renta, Giorgio Armani, Katherine Hamnett, Stella McCartney,



BAMBOO



CORN



SOY



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## Go Green! Sew Green!

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Elieen Fisher, and Levi Strauss, just to name a few. Think jeans, baby clothes, evening gowns, accessories, and bridal gowns. The design house of Olivia Luca offers organic options for their custom bridal gown customers, with a selection of silk organza, silk shantung, hemp/silk charmeuse, bamboo/cotton, and cotton sateen—all organic, sustainable, and “fair trade.”

### Green Is Complex

What makes a fabric “green”? The answer lies in methods of farming, harvesting, manufacturing, and mill practices including treatment of mill workers.

Fabric production is one of the top five polluting industries in the world. But the high fashion world is making inroads by demanding that the process become less environmentally abusive. In the home sewing market, “green” fabrics are not as widely available as conventional fabrics, and the choices are limited. Pricewise, organic and sustainable fiber fabrics run the gamut from reasonable to quite expensive. Organic farming and manufacturing methods (for example, organic cotton is hand-picked) may drive up the cost of some of these fabrics.

A fabric may be natural but not necessarily grown or manufactured in an eco-friendly fashion. What is sold as organic must meet strict federal guidelines for growing the crop and manufacturing the textile. This means that the crop is grown without chemical pesticides and fertilizers and the yardage is manufactured in textile mills that do not use harmful chemicals in the manufacturing process. These mills employ production methods which use less water and energy, as well as minimum waste matter run-off into streams and rivers. The dyes used are “minimum impact dyes,” and when the fabric is printed,

water-based pigments are used (some vegetable, others safe chemical) to complete the properties of a “green” fabric.

**Fair Trade:** True eco-sensitive manufacturing is mindful of the fair trade concept according to international principles. A fair living wage for the workers, a healthy environment, and a ban on child labor on the part of the mill and farm are a big part of the green movement.

**Carbon Footprint:** According to the Web site [www.carbonfootprint.com](http://www.carbonfootprint.com), “a carbon footprint is a measure of the impact human activities have on the environment in terms of greenhouse gases produced, measured in units of carbon dioxide.” It goes further to divide the carbon footprint into two categories. The primary footprint includes direct emissions from domestic energy use (such as using the sewing machine, iron, washer and dryer, etc.), as well as daily transportation issues. The secondary footprint is the result of buying habits. Is your fabric produced by organic methods? How far did your fabric have to travel to be sewn up on your sewing machine? The more locally produced a fabric, the less fuel consumption and the lower the carbon emission—which means a smaller secondary footprint.

Some aspects of our everyday lives just cannot help but leave a large carbon footprint. The concept of “carbon-offset” is designed to help us counteract this. For example, if you must drive around the city to find that perfect lining fabric, you can offset the emissions produced by your car by doing something that will compensate for them. For example, you could take public transportation, carpool, or organize fabric buying trips where only one vehicle is used. That is where our beloved ASG Neighborhood Groups can shine. There is nothing more enjoyable than fabric shopping with ASG friends!

## Organic Fabrics

Familiar natural fiber fabrics have organic counterparts.

**Cotton:** Conventional farming and manufacturing methods for cotton are the most abusive to the environment and the health of textile workers. Although the cotton crop is grown in less than 3% of the world's farmed land, it consumes approximately 25% of the pesticides. Organic cotton is the most easily available "green" fabric, even though organic cotton accounts for only 0.03 percent of all the cotton produced. What about the properties that make cotton easy to sew and use? Gone are the days when cotton had to be purchased with shrinkage in mind. In conventional treatments, formaldehyde is used to give cotton its no-shrink and no-wrinkle properties. In organic cotton production, formaldehyde is not used. There are some manufacturers who use the sanforization process to pre-shrink the fabric and then use materials such as cornstarch to give it a crisp look. However, it's "buyer beware" because organic cotton may shrink. To be safe, purchase  $\frac{1}{8}$  yard extra for every yard of fabric you need.

**Silk:** Organic silk is produced with all the required standards for the textile mills, and with methods free from animal (or silkworm) cruelty. Conventional silk farming kills the larvae by boiling the cocoon to unwrap the silk fibers around it—all in the name of speeding up the harvesting process. With animal-sensitive farming, the moth leaves the cocoon on its own, after which the fibers are obtained from the cocoon that is left behind.

**Wool:** Wool sold as organic must follow strict guidelines set up by the Organic Trade Association. The sheep must be fed certified organic feed. Synthetic hormones and pesticides are prohibited and the producers must keep their livestock healthy through good management practices.

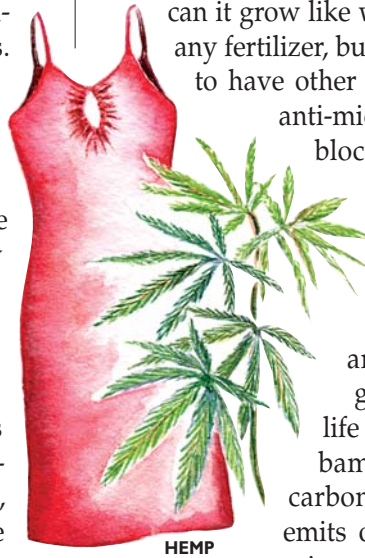
## Sustainable Crop Fabrics

Soy, hemp, bamboo, and corn are what the ecology-minded like to call "sustainable" and "renewable" crops. These are fast-growing plants that can be replenished in a short amount of time.

**Bamboo:** This is a much heralded sustainable, renewable fiber. Not only can it grow like wildfire without any fertilizer, but it is purported to have other properties such as anti-microbial, UV-ray blockage, soil and moth resistance, and breathability. It also takes less acreage and water to grow. As plant life is wont to do, bamboo absorbs carbon dioxide and emits oxygen into the environment through

the process of photosynthesis. What gives bamboo the edge over slower growing plant is that because it grows so fast, it absorbs more CO<sub>2</sub>. The fiber's smooth, hollow, and thin qualities make bamboo fabric strong and silky-soft at the same time. You can find bamboo in such diverse fabrics as denim, tweed, and the softest knit.

**Corn:** The cornfields of the American Midwest may very well qualify as the next hot thing in the fashion (and therefore sewing) world. Corn is the latest darling of the eco-minded. We've been nourishing ourselves with corn for hundreds of years. Who would have thought we would be using it for transporting ourselves and covering our bodies too! At least two textile companies have created man-made fibers that begin by extracting the sugar (glucose) from corn kernels, fermenting the sugar, and then transforming the fermented products into a high performance polymer which is extruded into



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## Go Green! Sew Green!

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fibers. DuPont's version is called Sorona; Cargill Inc. produces Ingeo.

**Hemp:** Hemp fabric isn't new. In fact, it's the fabric Betsy Ross used for the first American flag—a good choice because hemp is a strong and durable fiber. It is actually more water absorbent and will dye better and retain its color better than any fabric, including cotton. But hemp, like other vegetable fibers, contains a natural glue called lignin. If the lignin is left in, the coarse fabric is great for things like flags but too rough for most apparel. The traditional method for removing lignin uses acids, which weakened the hemp fibers and left them too unstable for use. However, in the mid 1980s, researchers developed an enzymatic process to successfully remove lignin from the hemp fiber without compromising its strength. This opened the doors to a wide range of fabrics, either 100% hemp or hemp blended with other fibers, such as cotton and Lycra, which are wonderful for both apparel and home dec uses.

**Seaweed:** On the horizon, but not yet commonly available, is fiber and fabric made from 100% seaweed or seaweed blended with other fibers.

**Soy:** Soy fabric uses fibers made with the dregs left over from soybean oil and tofu production. It was first created by a Chinese gentleman named Li Guanqi and is now available in the U.S. The fabric feels as comfortable and soft as silk and cashmere. While pure soy fabric is not widely available to the home sewer, a soy/cotton blend fabric can be found via online retailers. For knitters and weavers, soy yarn is available, also online.

### Greener Sewing Notions

The notions industry has made some progress with manufacturing certain notions. Here are a few to consider:



**Fiberfill and Batting:** There are several eco-friendly stuffing choices. Fairfield Processing's Nature-fil batting and fiberfill are made of bamboo, a naturally soft and breathable option that's perfectly suited to wearable art. The EcoCraft line of batting and fiberfill from Mountain Mist Company is made with Ingeo, a corn by-product.

**Interfacing:** Mistyfuse fusible interfacing is a product from Esterita Austin that is produced with solvents that are safe for the environment.

**Bamboo Accessories:** Bamboo point turners, as well as knitting needles and crochet hooks, were "green" long before the movement had a name.

**Buttons:** Buttons from natural and found materials, twill tape, elastics, and beautiful organic cotton lace are available from Web-based companies like NearSea Naturals. JHB has real rock buttons which are available wherever JHB buttons are sold.

**Dyes:** Dyes made from natural pigments and soymilk used as a binding agent and sizing agent makes the whole dyeing process gentler on the environment. "Salvation through Soy!" by John Marshall (<http://www.johnmarshall.to/8-RPublications.html>) draws on his knowledge of traditional Japanese dyeing techniques.

### Re-use, Re-make, Re-style

One way to make our sewing activities a little less emission-heavy is to embrace the old recycle concept reinvented as re-use, re-make, and re-style. While fabric shopping is in every sewer's DNA, creating things from "found fabric" recycled from other clothing is another way to flex your sewing skills.

Want a new sweater this winter?

Try making a hybrid from your current collection of stained, torn, outdated, or just unwanted sweaters. Sweater bodies can be combined and scarves can be reborn as sleeves.

Anthropologie is a

great inspirational source for hybrid sweaters. ([www.anthropologie.com](http://www.anthropologie.com))

Don't let those small fabric scraps sit around collecting dust. Make a crazy quilt project or use them to stuff pillows. Fashion them into appliqués or create contrast facings, piping, and other small but interesting details for your sewing projects. Donate them to a local school or youth organization for art projects.

Yes, polyester can be seriously recycled, and not just by re-sewing it into something else! Here's a great way to make sure that your favorite Polartec fleece creation doesn't end up in a landfill. If it's too worn to be seen in public, send it to Patagonia, whose high-end synthetic fleece clothing is worn by people who enjoy the very environment that synthetic fleece manufacturing destroys. Patagonia is an eco-conscious company that collects used Polartec clothing (any brand) to melt and create new fabric. Some of the old fabric collected is already recycled plastic, so the "carbon footprint" is even smaller. Information about their recycled fleece garments program is on Patagonia's Web site ([www.patagonia.com](http://www.patagonia.com)).

### A Greener Sewing Room

There are changes—large and small—that you can make so that your sewing environment is greener, too.

**Lighting:** Use the CFL (compact fluorescent lightbulb) in your sewing room or sewing area. These small, swirly-shaped bulbs, which can be used in lieu of incandescent light bulbs, fit into the same socket and use 75% less energy. They give off the same amount of light with considerably less wattage. For example, the 7-watt CFL gives the same amount of light as a 40-watt incandescent. When they finally burn out, be sure to discard them in the recycling bin and not with your general trash. They contain a small amount of mercury, which doesn't belong in a landfill.

Consider installing a Solatube in

the ceiling. This brighter alternative to a skylight lets in a consistent amount of daylight all day, no matter what the position of the sun. The tube has a compact and flexible design that allows it to be installed in just about any room, including rooms without direct roof access and smaller spaces where daylight usually is not an option.

**Flooring:** Consider carpet that is made from recycled plastic bottles. If remodeling, consider bamboo floors.

**Cleaning:** Want to give away your stuff to good homes rather than throw it away? Join Freecycle.org, a non-profit online organization whose members are dedicated to keeping good stuff out of landfills. Membership is free and you can post messages on the boards offering to give away things that you don't want or need, rather than throwing away the items. Someone else in your community decides they would like those things and makes arrangements to pick them up. No shipping is required since all the action takes place locally.

**Energy conservation:** Remember to unplug all machines and irons when not in use, even if they are turned off. Keeping the machines plugged in puts a strain on the grid.

*Samina Mirza is an ASG member and past president of the Houston Chapter. She is now a member of the ASG Headquarters staff with responsibility for membership.*

## SEWING GREEN

Many fabric sources, including local fabric retailers who support ASG and advertisers who support *Notions*, carry some organic fabrics. In addition, here are a few who deal exclusively in organic textiles:

### The Bamboo Fabric Store

www.bamboofabricstore.com  
Mountaintop Publications  
274 Birdsall Road, Farmingdale NJ 07727  
732-835-9326

*100% bamboo fabrics and bamboo blends, as well as bamboo yarn for knitting*

### Hemp Fabric Shop

www.hempfabricshop.com  
Mountaintop Publications  
274 Birdsall Road, Farmingdale NJ 07727  
732-835-9326

*100% hemp woven and knitted fabrics*

### Mystic Bamboo

www.mysticbamboo.com  
28552 Munera, Mission Viejo CA 92692  
949-813-8547

*A range of bamboo fabrics—mainly blends—including French terry, denim, and velour*

### NearSea Naturals

www.nearseanaturals.com  
PO Box 345, Rowe NM 87562  
877-573-2913

*Organic cotton and wool fabrics, sustainable blend fabrics, buttons from natural and recycled materials, organic batting and stuffing, natural and organic yarns, and more*

### Organic Cotton Plus

www.organiccottonplus.com  
822 Baldrige Street, O'Donnell TX 79351  
806-428-3345

*Organic cotton fabrics, including nine types of undyed cotton and 110"-wide sheeting*

### PM Organics

www.pmorganics.com  
P.O. Box 31281, Alexandria VA 22310  
703-627-1512

*Wide variety of knit and woven organic cotton fabrics, plus organic cotton yarn, twill and bias tapes, Cluny-style laces*