

What is "kenaf" paper?

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Dear EarthTalk: What is "kenaf" paper? From what I've heard, it's good for the environment. But what exactly are its benefits and where can I obtain some? -- Tiffany Mikamo, via e-mail

Kenaf, a fast-growing, non-invasive annual hibiscus plant related to cotton, okra and hemp, makes ideal paper fiber as well as great source material for burlap, clothing, canvas, particleboard and rope. Its primary use around the world today is for animal forage, but humans enjoy its high-protein seed oil to add a nutritious and flavorful kick to a wide range of foods. In fact, kenaf has been grown for centuries in Africa, China and elsewhere for these and other purposes, but environmentalists see its future in replacing slower-growing trees as our primary source for paper.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) research shows that kenaf yields some six to 10 tons of dry fiber per acre per year, which is three to five times more than the yield of Southern Pine trees—now the dominant paper pulp source in the U.S. And to top it off, researchers believe kenaf absorbs more carbon dioxide—the chief "greenhouse gas" behind global warming—than any other plant or tree growing. Some 45 percent of dry kenaf is carbon pulled down from the atmosphere via photosynthesis.

No wonder environmentalists are so bullish on kenaf for our common future. "The more kenaf we grow, we can not only absorb significant amounts of the carbon dioxide that is responsible for global warming," says Bill Loftus of the non-profit Kenaf Research Farm, "but also educate the world on how to be self-sustainable through kenaf's many properties of providing food, shelter and economic opportunities."

As to its use for paper, 10 major U.S. newspapers have tested kenaf-based newsprint and were pleasantly surprised by how well it held up and how crisply it displayed text and pictures. And since it is already brighter than wood-based pulp, it requires less bleaching before it can be used to carry ink. But since kenaf is not mass-produced the way paper trees are on big plantations across the Southeast and West, it still costs more than regular paper and as such has not gone mass market, despite its environmental.

Also, while some policymakers and many environmentalists would like to see our paper feedstock switched from Southern Pine and other trees to kenaf, entrenched timber companies

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with big investments in tree farms (and who employ many a Washington lobbyist) do not. And with many timber companies already suffering economically, lawmakers are unlikely to mandate changes that could make matters worse.

Even if kenaf doesn't become the paper of tomorrow, it may still have a bright future. The Kenaf Research Farm reports that Toyota is already using kenaf grown in Malaysia for insulation and interiors in some cars. Toyota is also experimenting with using kenaf to reinforce the sugarcane- and maize-based biopolymers it hopes can replace many of the plastic and metal parts in the vehicles it is designing today.

Your best bet for finding some kenaf paper is to try a specialty art supply or stationery store. One good online source is The Natural Abode. Photographers might try using kenaf photo paper, such as Pictorico's ART Kenaf, in their ink jet printers to give their snaps a unique look and a green pedigree.

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