

Finding organic cotton

Written by EarthTalk® □ From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine.
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Dear EarthTalk: *I always thought cotton was eco-friendly, but I recently heard otherwise. What's so bad about cotton? And where can I find organic cotton clothing? -- Jamie Hunter, Twin Falls, ID*

There's a lot "bad" about conventionally grown cotton—cotton grown with the aid of synthetic chemicals, that is. The Organic Trade Association (OTA), a nonprofit trade group representing America's burgeoning organic cotton industry, considers cotton "the world's dirtiest crop" due to its heavy use of insecticides. The nonprofit Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) reports that cotton uses 2.5 percent of the world's cultivated land yet uses 16 percent of the world's insecticides—more than any other single major crop.

Three of the most acutely hazardous insecticides, as determined by the World Health Organization, are well represented among the top 10 most commonly used in producing cotton. One of them, Aldicarb, "can kill a man with just one drop absorbed through the skin," says OTA, "yet it is still used in 25 countries and the U.S., where 16 states have reported it in their groundwater."

Conventionally grown cotton also uses large amounts of nitrogen-based synthetic fertilizer—almost a third of a pound, says the OTA, to grow one pound of raw cotton. To put that in perspective, it takes just under one pound of raw cotton to make one t-shirt. Researchers have found that the fertilizers used on cotton are the most detrimental to the environment, running off into freshwater habitats and groundwater and causing oxygen-free dead zones in water bodies. The nitrogen oxides formed during the production and use of these fertilizers are also a major part of the agricultural sector's greenhouse gas emissions.

This is all true despite that the use of sprayed insecticides is quickly decreasing with the advent of genetically engineered cotton seeds that have insecticides bred right into them. A third of global cotton cropland and 45 percent of world cotton production now uses genetically engineered seeds. This poses a whole other set of issues, as some scientists fear that the proliferation of such "Frankenseeds" can lead to pest immunities and even the unleashing of so-called "super pests" that can resist virtually any pesticide.

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Organic cotton farming eschews synthetic chemicals (as well as genetically engineered seed) in favor of time-tested natural alternatives that ward off pests, replenish and maintain soil fertility and generally optimize growing conditions without compromising the environment or our health. “Composted manures and cover crops replace synthetic fertilizers; innovative weeding strategies are used instead of herbicides; beneficial insects and trap crops control insect pests; and alternatives to toxic defoliants prepare plants for harvest,” says the Sustainable Cotton Project (SCP), a nonprofit that helps cotton farmers in California’s Central Valley discover the economic, environmental and health benefits of avoiding synthetic chemicals.

For consumers able to pay a little more, there are now thousands of organic cotton retailers. The OTA reports that American farmers increased plantings of organic cotton by 26 percent in 2009 over 2008, while sales of organic cotton fiber grew 10.4 percent (to \$521 million) during the same time. The OTA’s Organic Pages Online lists vendors (and links to their websites) by product type; many sell online as well as through retail chains. Even some big box stores now offer organic cotton items. So keep your eyes peeled and be a part of the solution by opting for organic cotton next time you stock up your drawers.

CONTACTS:

UNFCCC, www.unfccc.int;

Worldwatch Institute, www.worldwatch.org.

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