SUSTAINABLE FIBERS MAKE PROGRESS

ECOSTYLE

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THERE are a few well-known retail fashion catalogs in the U.S. that utilize direct mail campaigns to offer their clothing made of earth-friendly materials. You typically see organic cotton, hemp, silk and natural wool in those pages. That selection is about to increase. With expanded offerings, even conventional distributors and retailers are paying attention.

Indeed, new textile versions of natural fibers stir welcome enthusiasm in the green market. The pleasure is due to harmonizing modern technology and nature. Education, marketing and patience is a familiar process we know through past tribulations with the organic food industry.

Hemp is about to receive new attention as certified organic. Since organic standards are offered throughout the world, it makes sense to certify hemp today. Yet the past resistance to label such an ecological plant in the first place is understandable. That is because hemp requires no herbicides or pesticides. In addition, it leaves the soil in a healthy condition. Thus rotating crops is not essential. So why bother with certification?

Pan World Traders decided to bother. Certification for their hemp in Rumania made sense because they were already processing fibers without harsh chemicals. Their alternative is natural mechanical processing. Pan World hired an ecoagronomist to monitor its cultivation and to research the best methods to achieve authentic organic hemp. They also developed a relationship with farmers and invested in their equipment while paying them significantly more for harvesting. Finally, an organic certified agent verified all efforts and strategy.

Pan World Traders is growing certified organic hemp specifically for textiles and fashion apparel. Their transitional period is nearly complete and hemp production for their Ecolution brand is scheduled to be certified as organic by 2005.

Cheryl Kolander, of Aurora Silk and Frank Williams Hemp Company, not only offers limited certified organic hemp fabric imported from Eastern Europe, she has vegan silk as well. Vegan silk? Yes, it is a method few Americans are familiar with. The silkworms are not killed in their cocoons as in traditional methods. They are allowed to escape instead. In doing so, the thread breaks before it is unrolled. As a result, vegan silk fabric can offer a unique look and feel.

Cheryl is a textile and dye artist who sells 120 color options for both hemp and silk. She creates her dyes from nature's botanical offerings and has been doing so about 30 years. Organic dyes don't interest mass production manufacturers, but enticement from cottage industries is growing.

NEW NATURAL AND SYNTHETIC FIBER

Bamboo is gaining popularity and the cellulose fiber is currently available from China and U.S. distributors. Antibacterial properties eliminate odor naturally and the moisture absorbency is twice that of cotton. Bamboo fiber breathes and has a very soft texture, much like a blend of cashmere and silk. Spinners find it easy to use. Like hemp, bamboo blends well with other fibers.

Bamboo fiber (100 percent) is made in China by grinding, wringing, and then combing the actual pulp from bamboo plants. It is a high-tech process that includes refining bamboo pulp through hydrolysis-alkalization and multiphase bleaching. Not entirely a nonpolluting process, but it is a renewable resource with natural soil degradation that is attracting all types of fashion designers. Current finished goods available are socks, T-shirts, towels, bed linens, underwear and robes.

Ingeo is Cargill Dow's brand name for the first manmade fiber derived from 100 percent annually renewable resources. The production and use of Ingeo fibers means less greenhouse gases are added to the atmosphere in comparison with traditional synthetic fibers. However, proper conditions and handling are required to close the life cycle of production, consumption, disposal and reuse.

The process starts with a natural raw material, such as corn. Rice, potatoes, grass and straw are other options. Efficient conversion into plant sugars takes place, which are then fermented. The fermentation products are subsequently transformed into a high performance polymer called polylactide from which the branded Ingeo fibers and filament yarns are extruded.

What is driving the interest in earth friendly fabrics? Allergic reactions and poor health or pollution are common reasons. Small business owners are especially aware of Earth's cry for cleansing and big business is getting in on the act. Undoubtedly, new opportunities from natural fibers can be improved and pursued by enterprises today. ☐

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