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## Organic textiles - some common questions answered

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The Soil Association's textile standards, launched in February 2003, cover the processing and manufacture of organic textiles. The Soil Association's standards are the rules and regulations by which we ensure the integrity of organic products. Below are some common questions answered.

### Why do we need organic textiles?

The textiles industry is one of the largest polluters in the world. We need an alternative. One that isn't dangerous and doesn't cause such destruction to our environment. Around a quarter of the world's insecticides are used to grow conventional cotton<sup>1</sup>, and ten percent of its pesticides<sup>2</sup>. and at least 8,000 chemicals are used to turn raw material into clothes, towels, bedding and other items that we put next to our skin every day.<sup>3</sup> Shockingly, use of the pesticide endosulfan in farming cotton in developing countries is causing the poisoning of thousands of workers, often resulting in their death<sup>4</sup>. The scientific community's jury is still out on the exact effects to human health of many of the chemicals used in cotton farming, with potential side effects including cancer and disruption to the hormonal and reproductive systems of the body.

### What benefits do the textile standards bring?

The standards provide you, as a consumer, with the knowledge that the product you're buying has been produced with the aim of avoiding damage to the environment and human health. Any chemicals that harm wildlife or are suspected to cause cancer, birth defects or changes to reproductive organs are banned under Soil Association standards. Similarly suspected or proven allergens are not allowed.

In the words of an organic cotton grower

***'Organic farming ... saves lives from not using pesticides. We no longer have debt problems. Income is all profit at the end of season. Land and soil are preserved.'***

Gera Paul, a Béninese farmer<sup>4</sup>

The debt problems were primarily caused by farmers incurring large overheads. Organic cotton farmers tend to grow on a smaller scale and do not use expensive harvesting machines or large quantities of chemicals like conventional cotton growers. As a result of farming organically, some farmers are reporting higher incomes. Organic cotton is grown on a smaller scale and is generally handpicked. This a more accurate way of harvesting than using machinery - allowing workers to select the best quality cotton.

Organic farming improves the soil fertility, is better for wildlife and causes less pollution from sprays. Raw materials such as leather and skins would have to be produced to Soil Association standards. And no system of farming has higher levels of animal welfare standards than organic farms working to our standards.

### **What do the organic textile standards cover?**

The standards cover the processing and manufacturing of all natural textiles, with the production of the raw materials for leather and skins being covered under our existing standards for organic farming.

### **What certified products can I look out for?**

The range of products currently available includes underwear, fashion clothing, cotton wool, rugs, knitting yarn and mattresses (comprising organic cotton and wool). Keep an eye on our on-line information sheet 'where to buy organic clothes and textiles' for up to date information about our expanding list of licensees. You can find this by going to [www.soilassociation.org/library](http://www.soilassociation.org/library) and selecting the category 'textiles'.

### **Are organic textiles always more expensive?**

Organic textiles do not always cost more than those that are mass-produced. Although farmers get a premium for the crop, there are fewer middlemen, so savings can be made at this level. We compared the price of an organic cotton baby grow, an adult's T-shirt and socks with similar quality on the high street and found that the organic clothes were similarly priced.

### **Does growing cotton without chemicals work?**

Yes. Organic farmers around the world are showing that there is no need to rely on dangerous chemicals. Black ants keep caterpillars and other pests under control in Uganda. In other countries, mixtures of natural soap, chilli and extracts from local trees are used to repel pests, which can then be eaten by chickens or other birds. Insect traps can be used to detect when levels of infestation are rising, allowing farmers to time their applications to gain the best effect.

Pest, weed and disease control is achieved through crop rotation, choice of varieties, timing of cultivations and habitat management to encourage natural predators. Crop rotation is at the core of organic crop production, providing nutrients to the soil, helping prevent pest, weed and disease problems and maintaining the soil structure.

### **What about genetic modification?**

The same companies selling chemicals to use on cotton are now developing GM cotton. There are two main types of GM cotton, one is herbicide tolerant and one has insect resistance. Monsanto is the main developer of GM cotton globally. The same problems are emerging with GM cotton as with other GM crops: the use of sprays is not necessarily reduced, pesticide resistance is a possibility, as is contamination with other crops. No GM products will be allowed in organic textiles.

### **Will other certifying bodies be able to certify textiles?**

A number of other organisations currently certify organic textiles but the Soil Association is the first UK certifier to do so. We have taken a leading role in working with other certification and standard setting organisations to create a global standard which is compatible with our own standards. France, Germany, Holland and Switzerland are expecting to use the same tough standards as us within 18 months. .

### **Where can I buy organic textiles?**

The Soil Association has produced a list of companies selling organic textiles – we believe

that this is the most comprehensive directory available. This is available from [www.soilassociation.org/textiles](http://www.soilassociation.org/textiles) or by calling us on 0117 914 2444.

### **How can I support the work of the Soil Association?**

The Soil Association is a membership charity, we urgently need your support to continue our work. As public support for the Soil Association continues to grow, our ability to influence the thinking and policies of government and big business grows with it. In this way we help to develop a truly healthy and sustainable future. Join us today and help us to continue campaigning for sustainable agriculture and organic food. You can join the Soil Association on our website, over the phone or by writing to us.

- 1 Allen Woodburn Associates Ltd
- 2 Christina Robert, Easy Living Magazine, June 2006
- 3 William McDonough and Dr Michael Braungart
- 4 <http://www.pan-uk.org/Cotton>

### **Further Reading**

#### **Further reading :**

Organic textiles - briefing paper - Soil Association information paper  
Organic Cotton: From Field to Final Product (Pesticide Action Network UK, 1997)  
Genetically Modified Cotton: implications for small scale farmers (Pesticide Action Network UK, 2002)  
Organic Cotton Production in Sub-Saharan Africa (Pesticide Action Network UK, 2002)  
The International Market for Organic Cotton and Eco Textiles (Pesticide Action Network UK, 2002)  
Genetic modification – making cotton more sustainable? A review of GM cotton development (Soil Association, 2003)  
Please see the Soil Association website library, <http://www.soilassociation.org/library>, for more information

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