

Alternative fabrics

The deeper you get into sustainable quilting, the more conversations about cotton come up. We all love fabric, which is why we're here in the first place. But a few issues crop up with our unlimited supply of quilter's cotton:

- Growing cotton takes a lot of water and pesticide – in fact, it uses more pesticides than any other crop.
- Fabric manufacture and dyeing is a major polluter of land and rivers. The textile industry is considered the second most-polluting industry after oil and gas production.
- The textile industry is notorious for exploitative labor practices.

Looking for quilting supplies that minimize harm to the environment and give their makers decent working conditions can be difficult – it's harder to find out about fabric than clothing sources. There are also a lot of tradeoffs in fabric production that make it hard to make a "perfect" choice. But buying new fabric that is easier on the planet and people is definitely do-able! It can be satisfying to look for alternatives that match your needs and values. Here are a few places to start.

Fabric

Linen

Made from the flax plant, linen requires much less water than cotton and hardly any fertilizer or pesticides. Flax can grow in poor soil, and every part of the plant is useful. Bonus points if you want a neutral latte/khaki/dust background for your quilt, because linen in its natural shades is beautiful without dyes.

Linen has a wonderfully soft hand, and makes quilts that you want to touch and wrap up in. Usually sold as solids, linen gives your quilts great texture.

Linen's smooth, loose weave makes it less stable than quilter's cotton under the needle. That's a plus for piecing curves. Cutting exactly sized pieces or doing precise piecing, on the other hand, can be a bear. Try a little spray starch to get your pieces to flatten out and sit tight.

Hemp

Like linen, hemp is made from a plant that requires little water, fertilizer, or pesticide and is easy on farmland.

Hemp can be woven into a sturdy, smooth fabric that looks similar to linen, or into knits like jersey. Because hemp is made from the *Cannabis sativa* plant, it was banned from commercial production in the U.S. until the most recent Farm Bill gave a path to legalization. (Hemp is made from plants with only trace amounts of THC.) Colorado, among many other states, is starting to license agricultural production. This may lead to more domestically-produced hemp fabric becoming more available, which would be a big sustainability win.

Modal, lyocell, Tencel

These fibers are all made from cellulose and are the most ecofriendly types of rayon. Raw materials are sustainably managed beech or eucalyptus trees or bamboo, and manufacturing uses closed-loop systems that recapture chemicals instead of dumping them into rivers.

Fabrics made from these fibers are soft and lightweight and are used more for clothing than quilting. However, they can be fun to experiment with and can add bits of softness to the structure of a quilt block. Fancy Tiger usually has an interesting selection of these fabrics in various weights.

Recycled polyester

Polyester is a petroleum product that never biodegrades and requires much more energy (though much less water) to manufacture than almost any other fabric. So I don't usually consider it a sustainable fiber. Recently, however, recycled polyester fabrics have become available that reuse polyester fibers that might otherwise wind up in the environment. Most of these are knit fabrics. Worth experimenting with!

Natural fiber blends

Cotton can be blended with silk, bamboo, linen, or hemp to make fabrics that have less of an environmental footprint than straight cotton. They often

combine the best qualities of both fabrics: for instance, silk-cotton blends have the soft hand of silk but the strength and washability of cotton. Look for chambrays, solids, and prints.

Better cottons

Some cottons are better than others: try these as alternatives.

American cotton

Solids from American Made Brand (a division of Clothworks) are made from cotton that is grown, spun, woven, and dyed in the United States. It has a smaller carbon footprint, since the fabric hasn't been shipped around the world twice by the time it gets to you; and labor conditions aren't a concern. Their color palette is limited, and their colors aren't as consistent from batch to batch as Kona. But if you're looking for basic colors, they can be a good option. eQuilter carries black, white, and a number of colors.

Japanese cotton

Factories in Japan are monitored much more carefully than competitors elsewhere in Asia. They also regulate the use of chemicals like formaldehyde (unlike the U.S.). This makes Japan a clear winner in labor practices and the environmental footprint of the manufacturing process.

Cotton made in environmentally responsible factories

Hoffman Fabrics owns their factory in Bali, and it uses a water filtration system that removes dyes and other chemicals from the manufacturing process from the water before it leaves the factory. This makes Hoffman lines made there (Indah batiks, Me + You) easier on the surrounding environment and communities.

Organic cotton

Organic cotton skips the heavy pesticides that make cotton hard on land and water, but it can take more water to grow than regular cotton. If you're concerned about chemicals in your household environment, however, organic can be attractive. Lines like Amy Butler "Organic Soul" and Cloud9 use both organic cotton and low impact dyes. In addition, Cloud9 has a commitment to the ethical treatment of workers in its manufacturing facilities.

Sources

Some stores focus entirely on sustainable fabrics. Shopping there means someone else has already hacked through some of the thicket of sustainability questions.

Hell Gate Fabrics (US – New York) <https://hellgatefabrics.com/>

Honey Be Good (US – New Mexico) <https://www.honeybegood.com>

Offset Warehouse (UK) <https://www.offsetwarehouse.com/>

Batting

Bamboo

Bamboo requires much less water and pesticide than cotton, making it a more sustainable batting choice. It has buttery soft drape and doesn't crease like cotton. This is my personal favorite.

Natural fiber blends

Quilter's Dream Orient is a blend of bamboo, cotton, peace silk, and Tencel. Shrinkage 3%. Feels a lot like cotton to work with, though it seems to crease a little less.

Wool

Great drape, strong, relatively heavy, and warm warm warm.

Recycled polyester

Quilter's Dream Green Dream is made from recycled plastic bottles. It has a pale green color that might show through quilts that use thin white fabric, but is otherwise a great option if you want a lightweight, washable batting with very little shrinkage (<1%).