

## **Sustainability in textile crafts – Idea Sheet**

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### **What can I do to reduce my impact**

#### **The 5 Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Repurpose, Recycle, Repair**

It began several years ago with the 3 Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle. But then the motto got expanded to repurposing (upcycling, giving it new purpose and new life by letting it be something different from what it was before) and repairing. Because someone realized that repairing what you have is as important as the other points.

We textile enthusiasts are in the great position that we can a) make our textiles ourselves and b) have at least the basic tools and crafts to keep them and any industrial textiles in shape and repair if necessary. Unfortunately most stuff (in general) you buy nowadays was never meant to be repaired. Most textiles are fabricated in a way that they keep up for 3 to 4 washes and then they loose shape, become thin and weak and have holes. The only way to avoid this is to avoid buying those products.

When buying fabrics, fibres and clothes, we are facing a challenge. Shall I choose eco-fibre, fair-trade, where should it be fabricated and so on. Was it coloured with synthetic or natural dyes. Could I make it better myself. Do I really need it?

Like in other products, personally I choose what I buy after following rule of thumb:

- Organic is good, fair and ethical working conditions for the workers are better still. Not always do they both go hand in hand.

Depending on the product, sometimes we have to choose. When it comes to fair-trade try to buy from the ones with a known label (<http://www.fairtrade.net/>, <http://www.wfto.com/>, <http://www.european-fair-trade-association.org/>, [www.gepa.de](http://www.gepa.de)).

Don't get distracted. Most companies offer a few organic items and/or fair trade but the rest of their line is conventionally made. This is a marketing trick to make buyers stop thinking. Check every label of every item. (We have a mail order company in Germany tends to work with these tricks. They have a basic repertoire in organic cotton, fair-trade garments but the majority is produced conventionally.)

Organic is even more complicated since there are regional labels in almost every country, textiles have several different standards (the most used are GOTS <http://www.global-standard.org/> and OEKO TEX <https://www.oeko-tex.com/en/manufacturers/manufacturers.xhtml>) all of which are a good start in my opinion but not the end. When it comes to certification we have another problem. Smaller producers won't get certified by either GOTS nor OEKO TEX. Both labels are meant for factories and industrialized manufacturing. So when buying from a small manufacturer, ask them how they produce their fabrics/fibres/clothes. There is a lot going on on a regional level without certification.

- Local is always better. Buy local, regional, organic, fair trade.

Great when you get everything in one package but the less kilometres a product has to be transported until it reaches you, the consumer, the better. Even if it is not fully organic. Buy directly from the producer and try to pay a fair price. Is organic still interesting if the resources had to travel several thousand kilometres to the factory and back to you? Can I find some local or at least regional (the country I love in or at least the continent) source for it?

- Use reclaimed materials. Buy second hand.

There is still a lot of cotton and linen fabric out there that can be re-purposed for clothes, blankets and many other things. Second hand has several advantages. All additives in the fabric are washed out

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already (yes, they are in the water system now but at least you won't add to them). The conventionally produced cotton has been produced already. With your choice to reuse and repurpose you won't at least add to any ecological disaster.

We all make mistakes in our choices and sometimes we just want things or we don't think when buying something. A while ago I was on the less plastic trip. With me, most life changing choices start radically and mellow into a normal tolerable form after a while. I should know better but this time I didn't switch my brains on. So I ordered a stainless steel canteen without any plastic coating or seal from an US distributor because I couldn't get anything like it in Europe (let alone Germany or my region). Some time later, I got the canteen. It is wonderful and I use it daily and take it with me filled with tap water and I really like it. But when I read the tag I realized that there is nothing good about it. Yes, it was produced ethically - in China ... with US American steel.

So the steel was mined and made in the USA, shipped to China, melted into my canteen, shipped to another factory for finishing and the plug (bamboo with no plastic!) and then shipped back to the US to be sold to me and flown to Germany. Great, big thinking on my part. I don't even dare to add up the amount of CO2 used just for shipping and flying for this little canteen without any plastic. But that's how it sometimes goes. As I said, we all make mistakes in our choices and luckily there is no justicar hovering over us to execute some horrible judgement for something like this. We live and learn. Or we try to make amends for our life style in some other way. Each to her own fashion, I say.

But back to fabrics.

Mending slowly seems to come into fashion again. This time textile artists like India Flint (<http://prophet-of-bloom.blogspot.de/>), Glennis Dolce (<http://shiborigirl.wordpress.com/>) and Jude Hill ([http://spiritcloth.typepad.com/spirit\\_cloth/](http://spiritcloth.typepad.com/spirit_cloth/)) are making mending into an art form. It has become fashionable by repurposing old (exotic) techniques for modern uses. Kantha quilts from India, boro mending from Japan, saki ori rag weaving from Japan, all that is ages old but the look is so new to us that this way of make do and mend can become fashionable again.

### **Caring for our fabrics and clothes is essential.**

Weak places should be reinforced as soon as we find them. Before washing clothes should be inspected and mended (so that the holes don't get larger and the weak spots don't get weaker during the trip through the washing machine). Darning is rather easy but as everything manual it might take a bit of practice to make it look nice (if that's what you aim for). So, maybe you can practice it on some old fabrics. If you don't know the basics, there are books like Educational Needlecraft from 1911 online <http://archive.org/stream/educationalneedl00goodrich#page/n0/mode/2up> or then there is the Online Digital Archive <http://www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/weavedocs.html> . I'm far from saying 'good old times' (usually those times were not good just far away) but in those old books are a lot of helpful hints.

### **Washing**

As a rule we can say modern washing machines are far more gentle than old ones and sometimes even more gentle than washing by hand. But you can save a lot on washing if you air your clothes after wearing.

Synthetic fibres made washing and ironing easy in the 50s and 60s. But what they didn't tell us was that they really needed to be washed. Can you remember those early nylon shirts? Yikes.

The advantage of natural fibres is that they keep much longer without washing when you air them right after taking them off.

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Wool doesn't have to be washed as often either. Wool clothes made from natural wool (in contrast to highly processed industrialised fibres and yarns) keep better with less washing. Brush out spots or treat them separately with dabbing water or alcohol on them. Don't rub, dab. Let it dry and brush it out.

Invest in a good clothes brush and it can save you money on washing.

Hang up clothes while they are still warm and they won't get wrinkly as easy (and some wrinkles from wearing will straighten out).

**Don't ever go to the dry cleaner.** It's only in name dry. What they actually do is, dunk your clothes in a huge bath of a chemical solvent (tetrachloroethylene, called perc). Perc is a chlorinated hydrocarbon which acts as a central nervous system depressant and can enter the body through breathing and skin contact. And it is a soil contaminant. It sinks into the ground water and has a toxicity at very low levels so that clean up after a spill is even more complicated than for oil spills. So when you give your clothes to the dry cleaner, your clothes are dunked in this huge basin full of Perc, moved around a bit for 8-15 minutes at 30°C. Then the solvent is removed and replaced by fresh solvent to repeat the process. After rinsing the clothes are tumble dried in a stream of warm air. And after that to remove the odour of Perc, they are deodorized with a stream of cool air. When the used Perc is filtered to reuse it again, the sludge in the filter is highly toxic waste and has to be treated like hazardous waste according to local law. Which usually means, they don't know what to do with it (it can't be neutralized or made un toxic in any way) so they either burry it in a landfill ship it to another country to drop it off there.

**Delicate items should be handwashed.**

I'm not talking here about everyday washing. Personally, I think the washing machine is one of the greatest technological inventions of the last century (or two). Even a small hand or foot cranked machine without electricity is preferable to doing the whole shebang back breakingly by hand in a tub. But (isn't there always a but) there are exceptions. No, I don't wash my woollen jumpers by hand. My washing machine is quite modern, water and energy saving and has a wonderful rocking programme for wool. But I have a wool coat, a nice jacket ethically produced with organic cotton (which was rather expensive) and some other clothes I prefer not to sacrifice to the machine.

**Soaking is essential to hand washing.** With large garments like a coat, I like to soak it for several hours in warm water in the bath tub. Use some container which is large enough so that you will have the less folds the better and after filling the tub/container with warm water let the garment sink on its own under the water. You may add a little squish of pH neutral soap just to break the surface tension. But otherwise don't do anything. Let it soak and rest in the tub. After a couple of hours remove the plug or lift it out of the container very carefully. Silk and wool will stretch when wet. Fill in new warm water with a bit more detergent and now press and squeeze gently to wash it. Never rub. When you're finished and the item fits into your machine, run it through the spin cycle or a spin dryer to remove the water and let it soak in fresh, clean water without any detergent. Press and squeeze a little to clean it and either let it drip on a flat surface (a coat is rather large so it might not fit in your machine) until most of the water is removed and then hang it to dry.

Wringing is never a good idea. And when I wash silk I usually give it a good rinse with some vinegar water.

### **Drying**

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The most economical and ecological way is, of course, line drying. Best in a well ventilated space or outside in the shade. And I would love to do it the whole year round but I don't have the space to dry it inside or covered from rain and snow. Most of my husbands shirts are made of linen or hemp which is not meant to be in a tumble dryer anyways. So I usually hang them in my flat to dry. Large items like my coat or my jacket are washed only once a year, so I try to time it according to the weather. The same goes for quilts and blankets. Everyday wash moves to the dryer when the seasons get wetter. This is not preferred but as long as I don't have an alternative, it will have to do.

The tumble dryer does not only use a lot of electricity but also wears down your fabrics. You know the lint that's collecting after each load? That is part of your fabric surface. Rubbed off during drying. This can't be good and gentle.

### **Ironing**

Well shaking after washing and a good hanging will lessen the need for ironing. Linen and hemp are better ironed when still slightly damp or damped with a fabric sprayer. I use one of those pump sprayers for flowers and only tap water and we're in the medium to high level pH area. (My "neutral" tap water has a pH of 7.5 to 7.8 on bad days towards 8.) I gave my steam iron away some time ago and use just a normal iron without any gadgets which heats up rather quick and doesn't use a lot of energy. Since I don't have any synthetics, I use only the hottest setting which wool and linen have no problem to stand.

That's it for today. Let me know what you think, tell us more ideas. This is all just the beginning. And it doesn't have to be all black and white. There are many colours in between and every little bit helps.



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