Organic Cotton – A Little History

No one is certain where the first cotton cloth originated. Archeologists have found evidence, however, that people in India and in Central and South America were weaving cotton into fabric as long as 4,000 years ago. And we know that by 1500 A.D., cotton was being cultivated throughout the warmer regions of the Americas, Eurasia, and Africa.

Until the late 18th century, cotton was grown, harvested, ginned, spun, and woven-all by hand. Cotton cloth was a luxury only the wealthy could afford. Two significant inventions changed all of this: Sir Richard Arkwright's water-powered spinning machine, and, just twenty years later, Eli Whitney's cotton gin. The cotton gin, a hand-cranked device that stripped the plant's fibers from its seeds allowed a worker to clean fifty pounds a day instead of one. After the invention of the cotton gin, the US became the world's foremost supplier of cotton fiber. Unfortunately, as the cotton industry flourished so did slavery.

Though historically India led in the manufacture of cotton fabric, with the advent of the industrial age, England soon dominated the market. The prosperity generated by large-scale cotton fabric production did nothing to benefit textile workers in England who fared little better than did the slaves in the US. Eventually, Indian mills were able to purchase the new machinery and regain control of the marketplace. But, once again, as volume grew and profits rose, the workers suffered. It was the plight of India's textile workers that inspired Gandhi's first fast in 1918 and India's eventual independence in 1947.

Throughout its four-thousand-year history, cotton had always been grown organically. Then, as a result of the development of pesticides and chemical fertilizers during WWII, the cultivation of cotton changed dramatically.

In the late 1950s-only ten years after their introduction-the environmental damage caused by DDT clearly demonstrated the negative potential of long-term use of agricultural chemicals.

There is a more natural way to grow cotton. In recent years, many people have urged a return to more traditional cultivation methods. Today, cotton is being grown organically in 18 countries. We understand the world can't be changed overnight. But, we also know that changing the way we grow this one crop-cotton-could make a big difference, reducing the world's use of insecticides by 25 percent.

Today, insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, and chemical fertilizers are applied to the cotton plant throughout its growing cycle. This is what we mean when we say "conventionally-grown"-a term we find rather ironic, since it's only been the convention for fifty years.
During those fifty years, cotton has become an ever more vital and versatile agricultural commodity. Cotton fiber-durable, comfortable, and affordable-is woven into fifty percent of all textile products. Unfortunately, this makes the following statistics all the more significant.

While only 3 percent of the world's arable land produces over forty billion pounds of cotton annually, it is the most heavily sprayed field crop on the planet. Twenty-five percent of all insecticide is applied to cotton. In the US, as many as 200 types of chemicals might be applied to a single plant in one season-that translates to one third of a pound of chemicals for every pound of cotton fiber. In California, one and a quarter pounds of agricultural chemicals are used to produce the conventionally grown cotton in a single set of queen-sized sheets.

If all the cotton in the world were grown organically, the use of insecticides could be reduced 25 percent. In working toward that end, *At Home Naturally's* Coyuchi bedding has been recognized for its role in bolstering the production of organic cotton. We've received the United Nations Second Annual Fashion Industry Award for Environmental Excellence.

Every fiber of cotton we use is produced in accordance with the standards set forth by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). Individual organizations handle the actual certification of cotton fiber produced in different regions: SKAL, a Netherlands-based certifier, oversees the cotton grown in India. What standards must we meet in order for our cotton to be certified as organic? At the top of the list outlined by IFOAM in its Growing and Processing Standards are the following: seeds must be non-genetically engineered; insects should be controlled by methods that simulate what occurs in the natural environment, where "good" bugs eat "bad" bugs. There must also be an emphasis on keeping plants healthy- healthy plants are more resistant to infestation-fields are usually weeded by hand. Organic farms are not allowed to use any chemical fertilizers or chemical inputs, such as herbicides or other pesticides.

All our organic cotton is grown in India by family farmers organized in cooperatives. We willingly pay premium prices to these small-scale growers for their organic cotton fiber because this encourages organic practices that protect not only the environment, but the farmers, their families, and their communities from exposure to toxic agricultural chemicals. Also, by purchasing their cotton at a better price per kilo, we help support local and economically sustainable production.

Farmers in India are aware of the facts: Cotton uses 25% of the world's insecticides and accounts for $2.6 billion spent on pesticides each year. Conventional cotton production involves added costs, risks of exposure and the need to increase chemical inputs each season. By contrast, organic growing offers many benefits: improved soil fertility, decreased costs and increased revenues, less requirement of water as organic methods help retain moisture in the soil and promote porosity, and food crops produced alongside the cotton that are more healthful.

The organic cotton is produced by three growing projects in India, two located in Madhya Pradesh and one in Gujarat. The first was initiated in 1992, the second and third in 1996. Since then they have expanded to include over 2,500 family farmers, collectively producing over 400,000 pounds annually

Before switching to organic production, these farmers were borrowing from money lenders at a rate of 24-36% per annum in order to purchase pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Alternative, safe and organic methods save the farmers money and also, according to Greenpeace in India, affect children: Studies have shown that children reared on organic farms have faster mental development than those growing up on conventional farms.

Cotton is grown rotationally and intercropped with maize, soybeans, wheat, sesame, sorghum and chilies. Some of these serve as "barrier" crops and actually repel pests; others, such as maize and sorghum, attract beneficial insects. Soil fertility is managed through the application of manure, compost and earthworm castings, crop rotation, (making sure at least one legume is planted each year), the addition of oil cakes as supplements and the use of bio-dynamic preparations.

In all three of the cooperative projects currently producing organic cotton, the standard of living as well as the quality of life have improved for farmers and their families. We look forward to increasing utilization of their cotton and are glad to be contributing to the practice of sustainable agriculture and social well-being of these people.