

O is for opportunity

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Organic apparel makers seek to expand the market among the young and environmentally conscious and their deep pockets.

By Jenn Abelson, Globe Staff | April 9, 2007

No longer just scratchy hemp frocks for hippies, organic clothes are riding the green fashion craze into consumers' closets this spring.

Looking to capitalize on the popularity of eco-conscious products that have gained mainstream acceptance in grocery stores and car dealers, merchants from H&M to [Barneys New York](#) are hawkling new collections of organic garments.

"All the retailers are rushing to organic. You can't afford not to. It appeals to the two biggest markets: youth and the baby boomers," said Marshal Cohen, chief retail analyst at NPD Group, a Port Washington, N.Y., research firm. "It's cool to care today. Five years ago, it was self-indulgence. Now it's self-indulgence with concern."

Nonfood organic items, such as clothing and sheets, are the second-fastest-growing category of all organic products, with sales jumping to \$160 million in 2005 from \$85 million in 2003, according to the most recent figures from the Organic Trade Association, in Greenfield. Besides using organic cotton, merchants are rolling out garments made from soy, corn, and bamboo.

Organic fibers, including cotton, come from farms that use soil without pesticides and chemical fertilizers, and meet all USDA regulations for organic farming, said Holly Givens of the Organic Trade Association, which represents 1,500 members, including farmers and retailers, in the organic agriculture industry in North America. If livestock such as sheep are involved, then the animals eat organic feed, and are required to have a certain amount of grazing time, among other conditions.

Current federal organic regulations do not cover how fibers are processed once they leave the farm. New voluntary global standards call for goods to have 95 percent organic fiber and restrict other details, such as the type of dyes and finishes allowed, the types of materials used to make buttons and zippers, and the labeling of the finished goods.

The appeal of organic clothes is less obvious than of other products, such as fruit and vegetables, which help consumers avoid ingesting foods cultivated with pesticides and chemical fertilizers. And hybrid cars win fans with promises of better mileage and less pollution.

There are no proven health benefits, however, with organic clothes, although some merchants, including American Apparel, say individuals with skin allergies prefer organic garments, because they are less likely to have an allergic reaction.

"Choosing organic cotton sends a message that shoppers value cotton produced without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and fertilizers," Givens said. "Those farm chemicals can enter the air we breathe and the water we depend on."

Organic cotton makes up a tiny portion of all cotton produced, and some brands are charging a premium for their eco-friendly garments.

Moral Fervor, a New York clothing line, is offering T-shirts made from corn, with a suggested retail price of \$83. Paige O'Brien, owner of Dunia in Maynard, a store that features organic clothes and other products, has yet to sell any of the Moral Fervor shirts she stocked last month. Moral Fervor says the corn garments are costly to make, requiring special machines for dyeing, drying, and printing.

"You have to buy into the concept," O'Brien said. "Organic clothes can be a little bit of a tougher sell when people ask, 'What am I going to get out of it?' It's an education process."

Barneys New York is giving consumers an added incentive to buy its pricey products: The retailer is donating a percentage of all sales to One Percent For the Planet, an environmental organization. Barneys partnered with organic-cotton company Loomstate to launch an exclusive apparel line this spring that includes a \$145 organic cotton hooded Henley sweatshirt and a \$125 organic cotton halter dress with flower print.

The company is also planning a Christmas campaign: "A Green Holiday!" will focus on products that are environmentally restorative, said Julie Gilhart, Barneys' fashion director.

Cheap-chic merchant H&M unveiled this month its first organic collection. It includes lines for women, children, and infants. The Swedish retailer dabbled with organic in the 1990s, but spokesman Lisa Sandberg said the lack of consumer awareness and high costs of organic cotton derailed that effort.

The company, which used about 30 tons of organic cotton in 2006, estimates it will use 600 tons this year. The new collection includes a \$34.90 aubergine tunic dress and \$59.50 jeans. Over the past decade, Sandberg said, customers have become much more concerned with the impact garments make on the environment and that such awareness is probably here to stay.

"Everywhere I look there seems to be new lines popping up that are eco-conscious," said Lily Lin, 38, of Acton, who recently bought soy T-shirts at Dunia. "If I put it on and it feels nice and I look at the tag and it says organic cotton, then I'm sold. Americans have so much buying power, and it's important for us to make conscious choices."

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