

REDISCOVERING THE VALUE OF NATURALLY COLORED COTTON

Awarded in 1993 by the UNEP (United Nations Environmental Program) Award for the Environment for leadership in *protecting the earth* and *agro-ecology innovation*, the [Fox Fibre Colorganic company, created by Sally Fox](#) in United States has been a pioneer in rediscovering and producing naturally colored cottons.

Naturally colored cotton is believed to have originated in South and Central America around 2000 years ago. In particular, Mochica Indians could be attributed with growing naturally colored cotton of myriad hues, which they maintained for over the last two millenniums on the northern coast of Peru.

Cotton is naturally grown today in varieties of colors: beige, red, earth brown, chocolate brown, gray and green. The use of naturally colored cotton has been historically suppressed, mainly due to the industrial revolution. Back then, it was much cheaper to have uniformly white cotton as a raw source for mass-producing cloth and fabric items. Currently, modern markets have revived a trend in using naturally colored cotton for its noted relevance in reducing harmful environmental impacts. Naturally colored cotton is already colored, and thus do not require synthetic dyes during process. Furthermore, the color of fabrics made from naturally colored cotton does not become worn and fade away compared to synthetically dyed cotton fabrics.

Naturally colored cottons are different from white cottons for they do not need to go through the dyeing process to achieve coloration. They are also cultivated and taken care of without the use of pesticides.

The advantages of colored cottons are the following:

- By not using chemical dyes, as well as reducing the use of pesticides, the naturally colored cottons have become popular for being ecological and environmentally safe. Commercial white cotton is by far the most pesticide-dependent crop in the world. Although it only occupies 3% of the world's farmland, it consumes more than 25% of the insecticides and 12% of the pesticides used worldwide. Fifty-five countries rely upon cotton for a significant percent of GDP. After dyeing, the chemical residues are thrown in nearby river contaminating water and soil. When the fabric is manufactured from naturally coloured lint, there is no need of artificial dyes. The World Bank estimates that almost 20% of industrial water pollution comes from textile dyeing and treatment. They have also identified 72 toxic chemicals in our water solely related to textile dyeing. The use of naturally



coloured cotton helps in reducing environmental pollution caused by artificial dyes and risks to the health of farmers and communities.

- The dyeing process is omitted when naturally coloured lint is used for manufacturing of the fabric, reducing the cost of production. Compared to the white cottons, the naturally colored cottons are shorter and economically less profitable. If the coloured cotton is paid higher price than white cotton, then the reduction in the cost of production of fabric caused by omitting dyeing process is compensated by high price of coloured cotton fabric.
- The mills producing cotton with artificial dyes have been reported to have adverse effects on the skin and human health (allergy, itching and cancer). Thus, fabric manufactured from coloured cotton has been found to be the best for labourers and also for consumers.
- The reaction to washing of natural colours is quite different from that of synthetic colours. Dyed fabrics more or less fade with each washing. On the contrary, fabrics from naturally coloured cotton [improves its fastness and colour intensity](#) with each washing.

In United States, Sally Fox has been a pioneer and proponent of organic farming methods, rediscovering the values of the naturally colored cotton and her influence has been considerable to protect and preserve the environment. In 1988, there was only one acre of organically grown cotton in United States and today there are over 20,000 acres of organic cotton. Sally Fox have been recognized by prestigious awards including the UNEP Award in 1993, the Discover Magazine Award in 1994 for Technological Innovation and the Good Housekeeping's Green Housekeeping Award for Environmental Leadership.

In Brazil the organic coloured cotton is produced without any synthetic fertilizers and pesticides by the [Natural Cotton Color Group NCC Ecobrands](#) in the city of Juarez Távora (PB). The plantation takes up 18 hectares of land and the production system relies on a guaranteed purchase agreement between the NCC and the local farmers.

In India, the [Central Institute for Cotton Research of Nagpur](#) and several State Agricultural Universities have taken up breeding programs for improvement of coloured cotton. About 40 coloured genotypes of upland cotton, mostly of various shades of brown and green colour are available in the National Gene Bank of Cotton maintained at the Central Institute for Cotton Research, Nagpur. These genetic stocks are indigenous collections.

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