

ECOHOME

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Eco-friendly textiles are finally hitting the high street, and about time, too

The commercial bigwigs in the fashion industry have cottoned on to the demand for environmentally friendly, ethically produced fabrics. Marks & Spencer is now the biggest retailer of Fairtrade fabrics on the high street, and earlier this year Jane Shepherdson, former Topshop design director, hooked up with **People Tree** (www.peopletree.co.uk), the pioneer in Fairtrade fashion.

Interior textile grandees have been relatively slow in comparison. That was until the Decorex fair in September, when leading designer Emily Todhunter burst on to the eco-scene with the launch of her organic fabrics range for **O Ecotextiles**, a company specialising in socially and ecologically responsible textile processing, and set the "interioristas" buzzing (www.oecotextiles.com; 020 7352 0054).

The range is so delectable I could eat it, and if I did take my knife and fork to it, I would know that it contains not a single pesticide or chemical fertiliser. All the fibres are processed non-toxically, using natural fibres from hemp, bamboo, abaca, linen and silk – even the dyes are organically certified.

"I am a firm believer in supporting artisanal techniques in traditional textile processing," Todhunter says. "Our fibres are grown organically and then spun, milled and woven, dyed and finished, avoiding the use of pesticides and chemicals, and without wasting huge amounts of fresh water."

The only place they might cause pain is my wallet – the fabrics are hardly cheap at £45 to £94 per metre. Nevertheless, I use them for my own curtains and sofa fabrics.

So why should we be using eco-friendly fabrics? According to Leigh Anne Van Dusen and Patty Grossman, the American sisters who founded **O Ecotextiles**, processing textiles causes pollution, and each year textile mills discharge effluent containing potentially harmful chemicals.

The Environment Protection Agency has been casting its gaze on the industry and has announced its commitment to creating "cleaner, safer technologies". Similarly, Defra has drawn together figures from the fashion, clothing and textile industries to "improve sustainability".

In the meantime, there are a number of other eco or traditional ranges that are available.

Interior designer **Hugh St Clair** has launched his Zanzibar collection, a range of fabrics made from hemp, a material that he says is "ideal for upholstery, and hangs beautifully when used as curtains or drapes" (www.hughstclair.com; 020 8964 2769).

Whereas Todhunter's collection is about natural, muted, sophisticated monochromes, St Clair's consists of dynamic and vibrant geometric patterns, inspired by an early 20th-century Viennese design studio, abstract art, African Kuba textiles and even his parents' old sofa. St Clair is also working in conjunction with **Eco** (www.eco-age.com), the new eco home interior store opening in Chiswick, London, later this month.

Recycling old curtains and fabrics is another green alternative – charity shops and curtain exchange stores are a useful source for this.

Also consider traditionally crafted textiles such as tweed and tartan. **The Isle Mill** (www.islemill.com; 01738 609090) is a family firm that uses natural fabrics and ancient techniques, inspired by the Scottish Highlands. **The Luskentyre Harris Tweed** company (www.luskentyreharristweed.co.uk, 01859 550 261) is equally interesting, producing tweed woven by hand on the Isle of Harris.

John Boyd Textiles (www.johnboydtextiles.co.uk; 01963 350451), in Somerset, has been making fabrics from horsehair since 1837. The dying process is not entirely eco, but the fabric is produced according to age-old methods and the result is a hardy soft furnishing product that will last a century.

An equally hardy fabric with eco-credentials is leather, which is excellent for sofas, armchairs and stools.

Bill Amberg is the leader in this field (www.billamberg.co.uk; 020 7727 3560).