

DESIGN

Women of the cloth

A new British company is leading the way in the production of eco-friendly textiles. **Kate Watson-Smyth** reports

So you've replaced all the bulbs in your house with the energy-saving sort. Your furniture has been responsibly sourced and you've blocked all the drafts and double-glazed the windows. But before you sink smugly on to your linen sofa, have you considered the material it's made from? The same goes for those rather tasteful coordinating curtains.

The textile industry is one of the world's worst polluters. This is due, in part, to the vast number of chemicals required in the dyeing and fixing of colours, but also because it uses huge amounts of water in the rinsing process. This is often carelessly disposed of and leaks toxins into the environment.

Last month, a UK company was launched with the aim of addressing this issue. Named O Ecotextiles, it is the brainchild of two American sisters who chose to set up in the UK when they realised there was little or no interest in their product back home. Formerly two high-fliers in the world of finance, Patty Grossman and Leigh Anne Dusen now design, develop and sell environmentally friendly furnishing fabrics made from natural fibres.

Both from Seattle, Grossman, 54, and Dusen, 58, spent four years researching their business. "The UK is at the forefront in the development of ethically processed textiles," says Dusen. "There is interest in Germany, Japan and Scandinavia, but you guys are so aware of your carbon footprints and global warming. In the US, it is polarised between Republicans and Democrats and there is a whole group of people who just think that it isn't an issue and they can be so aggressive about it, which is very distressing."

"Even though our initial research told us there was no market for our product in the US, we were determined to carry on. The more we learnt about the textile industry, the more we learnt about how big and polluting it is and we were sure we could turn peoples' ideas around. When the Al Gore movie came out, we did see a change of attitude, but we had already decided to launch in London and we were very happy about that."

The sisters have now teamed up with the British designer Emily Todhunter, of the Chelsea-based company Todhunter Earle. The firm has produced a range of fabrics using the new materials that won the *House & Garden* trophy for best merchandise at September's Decorex exhibition.

O Ecotextiles was born four years ago, but Dusen and Grossman were environmentally active long before that. Dusen gave up her job in banking to do voluntary work after the birth of the first of her three sons. Grossman, 54, who has nine-year-old twin girls, was the youngest-ever finance director at CBS. But she left to run a commercial development financial institution, a scheme that helps poor people to start up in business. When she joined, she was the only full-time employee and the fund stood at \$1m. Seven years later, it reached \$9m and



Green weaver: Emily Todhunter has worked with O Ecotextiles to produce award-winning fabrics JONATHAN EVANS

The pick of the eco-fabrics

TODHUNTER EARLE

The Emily Todhunter Organic Collection comprises three fabrics, using linen, hemp and cotton, and features sludgy greens, misty blues, muted pinks and soft yellows. It is available at Kathryn Ireland Fabrics from £70 per metre.

www.todhunterearle.com; 020-7349 9999; www.kathyrnirelandfabrics.com; +001 31 03 15 43 51

she received an award from Bill Clinton.

They were keen to channel their knowledge into their own business. One day while hunting for new soft furnishings, Dusen gradually realised that there were no natural fibres on the market that appeared to be truly green. Grossman takes up the story. "Your natural-linen sofa may look like it's undyed and natural, but even so, it will have been in contact with a lot of chemicals. People think that if the furnishings are made with cotton grown organically, then that's all right. But that's only the first step: the whole process is very long and very chemically intensive," she says.

There are two main areas of concern.

DENISE BIRD

Established in 2005, Denise Bird Woven Textiles sources organic textiles from around the world. Bird investigates each company before purchasing and never deals with unethical firms. Bird started out making fashion accessories and cushion covers, but is now expanding into interior design and is about to launch a range of fabrics for sofas and curtains. Prices start from £5 a metre.

The first is whether the fabric still has any toxic residues. "When we first started, we didn't think there would be a human health problem at all," says Grossman. "We had no idea that it really is quite an issue. We found one study that said that babies who grow up in newly decorated nurseries have double the asthma and allergy rates of those who don't. But the other issue

'AFTER AGRICULTURE, THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY IS THE MOST HARMFUL TO THE ENVIRONMENT IN TERMS OF POLLUTING WATER'

www.denisebirdwoventextiles.com; 01985 220 491

LOOP FABRIC

A range of fabrics such as muslins, silk weaves, linen, canvas and knits made from sustainable, biodegradable and/or certified organic fibres for soft furnishings and clothes. Prices start from £4.50 a metre.

www.loopfabric.co.uk; 01273 227 053

is the damage to the environment. There are so many chemicals used regularly and so many steps in the production process that people just don't know about."

Grossman talks with passion about a chemical glue used to bind the fibres together during the weaving process to prevent the shuttle catching, and thus slowing production down. That's called the "sizer". Then there's the "desizer" - that's a chemical used to remove the first chemical. And so the list goes on. There are petroleum-based fabric softeners, which are not in themselves harmful to humans, but if carelessly rinsed away will pass out into the environment through the water.

So the duo have found materials -

linen from Italy, organic cotton from Peru, bamboo from China and hemp from Romania - that are grown without pesticides or chemical fertilisers and then spun and dyed without chemical and without using huge amounts of fresh water.

"After agriculture, the textile industry is the most harmful to the environment in terms of polluting water," says Grossman. "We use beeswax, aloe vera and vitamin E as softeners." Sometimes a little eco-unfriendliness can't be avoided, though. "Everyone raves about bamboo being the great environmental saviour, but it has a dirty little secret. You have to treat it with sulphuric acid before you can use it, in the same way that rayon is made from melted wood. You can't avoid that melting process, but we have very tight controls over the waste water after this process has happened."

She also admits that they aren't completely green yet. "Our research has found that, ironically, it's better to use synthetic dyes because they need fewer toxic fixatives than the natural ones. It does mean that we are slightly caught between a rock and a hard place. But we at least hope that by being honest and open about our choices, perhaps the consumer will be able to force a change. If people demand greener dyes, then the manufacturers will have to take notice," she says.

In addition to their environmental policies, the sisters are keen to promote fair trade and are vehemently anti-sweatshop. They are currently working with nuns in Vietnam to introduce more progressive work standards in a textile factory there, as well as raising money to replace old looms in a Romanian village that has a tradition of weaving. The village still relies on the ancient technique of "dew retting", using the wind and sun to separate the fibre from the stock of the plant. It's a process that is usually chemically induced as it is so time- and labour-intensive. But the chemicals degrade the quality of the fibre. "We rely on high-quality yarn to produce the lustrous quality of the finished product, so the processes along the way are critical," says Grossman. The company is also hoping to help a group of women in an Ethiopian village that has a long tradition of weaving, aiming to bring them under the O Ecotextile umbrella.

Their yarns have just been certified Oeko-Tex 100, a universally recognised testing standard that informs the consumer that the product has been produced under environmentally friendly conditions and several of their fabrics carry both the Global Organic Textile and Greenguard Standard.

The British launch has produced several requests for samples and some confirmed orders. Now they just have to see if the Americans will warm to the idea. "There is a tradition of the British discovering American things and taking them back to the States where they become very popular, so let's hope that happens with us," says Grossman.