

A fabric with green sheen: Fast-growing bamboo offers more eco-friendly cloth

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Anne Kai, of Lacey, Wash., owns a small, hand-dyed fabric business with an environmental slant.

Her fabric of choice is bamboo, which has green qualities synthetic fabrics and cotton lack.

"Bamboo is a weed that doesn't require pesticides and commercial fertilizers to grow," she said.

And grow it does, like a weed and up to one foot a day, maturing within a year. In addition, the plant filters more water and oxygen and sequesters more greenhouse gases than an equal-size stand of trees.

Bamboo fabric wicks moisture, feels soft to the touch, and, to some extent, has antibacterial and antifungal properties, Kai said.

Kai, who also teaches high school art and English, made bamboo her fabric of choice for Seattle Dye Works, the hand-dyeing business she started in May. She hopes to attract the attention of quilters who practice the craft as an art form

She purchases her bolts of bamboo and bamboo-cotton fabric from a California-based company. She soaks the fabric in a mixture of soda ash and water to help the fabric better absorb her dyes.

She mixes the dyes in a miniblender, adds them to a bucket of water,

then places the fabric in the bucket, shakes it around, seals it and lets it soak up the color for several hours.

"The bamboo fabric holds the dyes really well. They don't start bleeding out after the first few washes," she said.

But as with many products vying for the attention of environmentally conscious consumers, bamboo fabric is not squeaky-clean green.

The process of turning the bamboo stalk into fiber and clothing requires the use of caustic chemicals similar to the process used to make rayon. And at this point, all of the bamboo fabric destined for the United States is made at one manufacturing plant in China.

There is research under way on more environmentally friendly ways to convert bamboo stalks into fabric.

"Bamboo isn't perfect," Kai conceded, but it's a greener product than conventional cotton, which requires large amounts of pesticides to grow, or petroleum-derived nylon and polyester fabrics and clothing.

"I just hope people become more aware of the products they are buying," she said. "I like to be as environmentally friendly as I can and use high-quality materials that are going to last."

Kai learned to quilt from her grandmother 30 years ago. After a career as a teacher, she's starting slowly with her new business, attending quilting conventions and arts and crafts shows, displaying her samples of hand-dyed bamboo fabric and handing out her business cards.

"I'm not too good at marketing," she said, conceding that her fledgling business needs a push. "I'm going to start by selling online."

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