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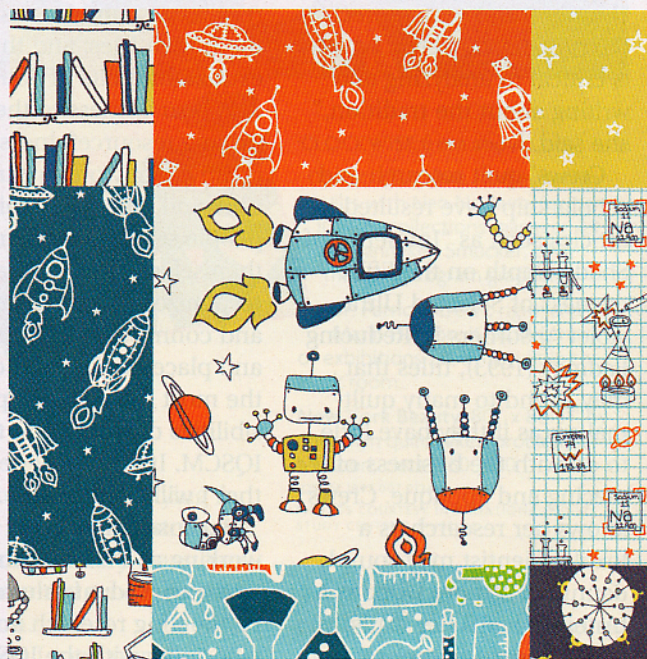


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Nurturing Sustainability:

The Growth of Organic

Increasing numbers of companies are working to make sure quilters have easy and affordable access to organic fabric. Some you may know of, some might be new, and some might surprise you.



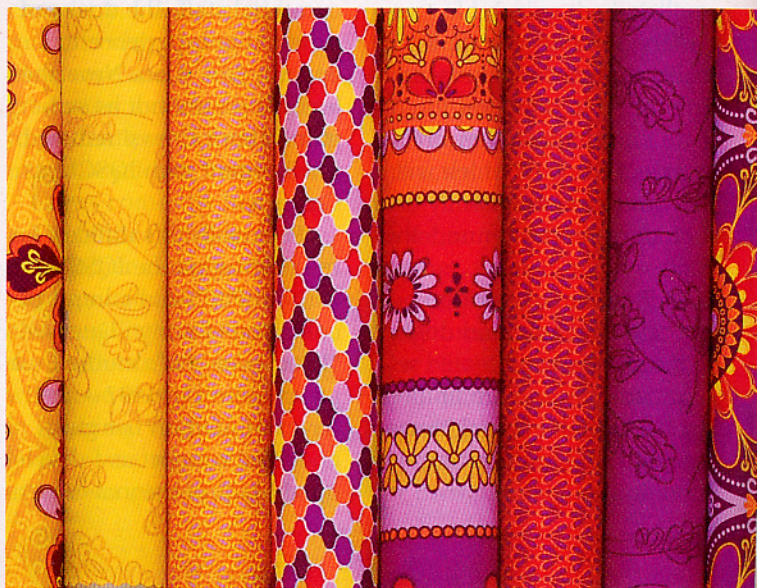
CLOCKWISE from above:

Monaluna's Havana collection

Robotic by Rebekah Ginda for Birch Fabrics

New Leaf, a collection from Daisy Janie

Cloud9 Fabrics' House & Garden



Cotton Fabric

BY MARY KATE KARR-PETRAS

Visit almost any mainstream grocery store these days and chances are good you will find organic food options on the shelves next to their conventionally produced counterparts, but can you find organic fabrics at your local quilt shop – or big box fabric store – when you're looking for quilting cotton?

Gina Pantastico, director of operations for Cloud9 Fabrics, is dedicated to making sure the answer to that question is an unequivocal "yes." Since 2009, she and Michelle Engel Bencsko, Cloud9's design and marketing director, have been producing eco-friendly fabrics with a modern sensibility. Pantastico sees Cloud9's efforts as part of a larger trend toward sustainable goods in every industry in response to consumer demand, with the rise in organic textiles being driven in part by apparel retailers like H&M, Target and The Gap.

"H&M released their first 'sustainable' collection in 2010 to great success," Pantastico said. "Since then they have been releasing several collections per year using a wide range of sustainable fibers. They are currently the world's largest user of organic cotton." She cited the growth of the organic cotton market – from \$240 million in 2002 to \$5.6 billion in 2012 – as further proof that organic is here to stay. "If we believed it was a fad, Michelle and I would not have invested the many hours we have in building this

business that we are so proud of," she added.

Cloud9 has been joined by other new fabric companies, like Birch Fabrics, Daisy Janie and Monaluna, that are committed to producing organic cotton fabric geared toward a mass market. They are all as passionate about providing sustainable textile options as they are about creating fresh and attractive designs people will want to use for quilts, apparel and home décor.

The look of organic quilting cottons is typically one that appeals to a modern quilting aesthetic – graphic patterns in clear, bright colors with a bit of a retro, minimalist vibe. Juvenile

collections are also prevalent, which could imply that the target audience for organic fabric is young mothers.

"My customers do seem to come largely from a particular demographic," said Jennifer Moore of Monaluna. "Many are modern quilters, and a lot of them are on the younger end of the spectrum. However, I'm not sure whether that's because these quilters are more interested in organics, or because most of the organic companies are offering more modern designs. I am currently the sole designer for Monaluna, and I know my style tends to be more modern and graphic. But I'm working on a collection that might not be so specific stylistically, so we'll see if it can appeal to a new demographic of organic customers."

Cotton is still grown in the U.S. by both conventional and organic means, but textiles in general are largely produced in Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Because of the international nature of the textile trade, there is no one governing or accrediting body that determines whether a fabric can be labeled organic. Consequently, those interested in buying sustainably produced fabric are confronted with a variety of logos and acronyms when trying to determine how a textile was made.

One of the most prevalent acronyms is GOTS, which stands for the Global Organic Textile Standard. Introduced in 2006, ►

The organic cotton market grew from \$240 million in 2002 to \$5.6 billion in 2012.



Only companies that have received Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) certification are allowed to display this logo.



ABOVE Robert Kaufman Fabrics' organic logo

BELOW Birch Fabrics in Paso Robles, California, is also home to Fabricworm.com

RIGHT Tilly from Daisy Janie



For more about organic cotton fabric, visit www.QuiltersNewsletter.com.

GOTS was developed with the aim of defining requirements recognized worldwide that ensure the organic status of textiles through the entire production process and that would be easily recognized by consumers. GOTS has gained widespread acceptance and is used by producers, manufacturers and retailers to label products.

A given textile can be GOTS certified at a variety of levels, including producing the greige goods or base cloth; dyeing and finishing the fabric; and packing and labeling. Growing and harvesting the cotton (fiber production) cannot directly be certified to GOTS but must be certified to a recognized legal organic farming standard, which for textiles sold in the U.S. is the United States Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program. According to Marcus Bruegel, technical director for the GOTS International Working Group, companies that sell to other businesses, such as

importers/exporters and wholesalers, must also participate in the inspection and certification program before final products can be labeled GOTS-certified in order to provide a consistent product assurance for consumers.

For this reason, the fabric you buy off the bolt may not be considered 100 percent organic even though the manufacturer adhered to organic standards at some point during its production; for instance, the manufacturer might have used organically grown, GOTS-certified cotton fabric, but might not have used a GOTS-certified process for printing and dyeing. Similarly, a company may offer GOTS-certified products without being fully GOTS certified itself.

One company that has achieved full GOTS certification for its greenSTYLE organic collections is Robert Kaufman Fabrics. "We're proud of this achievement and take it very seriously," said director of strategic marketing Kyle Sanchez. "In order for a company to brand their product with the GOTS logo, they have to become a certified company so GOTS can audit complete compliance after goods arrive in the U.S. This is an assurance to the customer and takes the guesswork out of the equation when buying organic." As of 2012, Robert Kaufman Fabrics was the only quilting cotton manufacturer listed as being fully certified on the GOTS website (www.global-standard.org).

Producing environmentally friendly cotton in an industry set up for conventional methods that use pesticides and other synthetic chemicals requires going the extra

mile. It's a challenge the newer organic-only companies are eager to meet.

"In terms of the commitment necessary to sell organic cotton, for us it is a three-tier process," said Cloud9's Pantastico. "First, we need to be sure the cotton is being grown and harvested in a way that would deem it organic. Second, we must be certain that the finishing and dye process meets the organic standards. And finally, we are extremely committed to the rights of the workers in our mills. One of my main concerns when sourcing mills is to ensure that all vendors are committed to ethical and responsible conduct. This includes respecting the rights of all individuals, a devotion to sustained social compliance and an accountability to the environment. I have been to Asia many times and have been in hundreds of factories and fabric mills. I know exactly what to look for in a mill that will be producing for Cloud9 Fabrics, and I also know when we should walk away."

Just as organically grown food typically costs more to produce than conventionally grown food – with the higher price passed along to consumers at the retail level – the same holds true for organic cotton. As manufacturers and quilters alike know, often the decision to buy fabric comes down to price. If the average retail price per yard for high-quality conventional cotton is \$10 or \$11, how much more are consumers willing to spend for organic? Pantastico's research tells her that consumers are willing to pay up to about 17 percent more than the average price – roughly \$12.82 per yard – before it starts to seem too expensive. Meeting ►





“I don’t want buyers to miss out on choosing organics just because of the price.”

Jan DiCintio, Daisy Janie

this price point has been and continues to be a challenge, particularly for companies that also produce conventional cotton fabric. Kyle Sanchez admits Robert Kaufman Fabrics has had to discount the true price of their organics in order to offer them at a price that will allow them to be adopted in the marketplace. Others, such as Riley Blake Designs, opted to discontinue their organic cotton collections after determining that customers were not willing to pay the difference.

Clearly, though, there are consumers who gladly pay a premium, whether for sustainably produced fabric or for designs they love. Cynthia Mann of Birch Fabrics and Fabricworm.com asserts her customers are willing to pay as much as 50 percent more than average retail for organic cotton prints, but knows that customers buy fabric based on the popularity of the designs as much as out of a desire to be environmentally friendly. Jan DiCintio of Daisy Janie agreed.

“There are buyers who actively seek out organic fabric and understand what the higher price point for organic cotton is actually buying,” said DiCintio.

“There also are buyers who are motivated to purchase by design alone. For them, price is not a consideration. That said, I understand the majority of quilters are trying to buy fabric on a limited budget. I don’t want those buyers to miss out on choosing organics just because of the price.” With the goal of affordability in mind, Daisy Janie and Cloud9 report they have worked to lower the retail cost of their fabrics since their debut collections, from almost \$17 per yard a few years ago to the \$12.50 to \$13.50 range in 2013.

Even as they work to bring fabric prices down, the owners of organic-only companies firmly believe that theirs are products worth the extra cost, one that people will be increasingly willing to pay.

“The numbers of sewers who reach out to me to express their ‘a-ha!’ moment regarding the critical difference between conventional and organic cotton and to share their gratitude grow year after year,” said DiCintio. “Folks are getting it, and it’s changing their buying habits across a number of areas for their homes.” 

Cloud9 Fabrics is taking their commitment to affordability a step further. In June, Cloud9 will debut the House & Garden collection available exclusively at national chain store Jo-Ann Fabrics. Jo-Ann’s carried a line of organic quilting cotton but consumers have reported they’ve been unable to find the fabric there the last couple of years.



“We had been interested in working with Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft Stores for quite some time because one of our goals is to make organic cottons available to everyone,” Gina Pantastico said. “We knew that if an industry leader like Jo-Ann’s, with their incredible visibility to so many consumers, carried Cloud9 Fabrics that organics would gain a position as important to the masses. When we first met with the Jo-Ann’s team, we were so pleased, and quite frankly, honored, because they recognized us as an industry leader in organic cotton and admired our creative direction. In our first meeting, the Jo-Ann’s team specifically indicated that they wanted all of the design direction to come from Cloud9 Fabrics. They provided us with a few concept ideas, but they wanted this collection to be a reflection of the Cloud9 aesthetic.”