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SUSTAINABILITY

# An Exhaustive Guide to Sustainable Shopping



By Katja Vujić, a writer at The Cut covering culture, news, wellness, and style.

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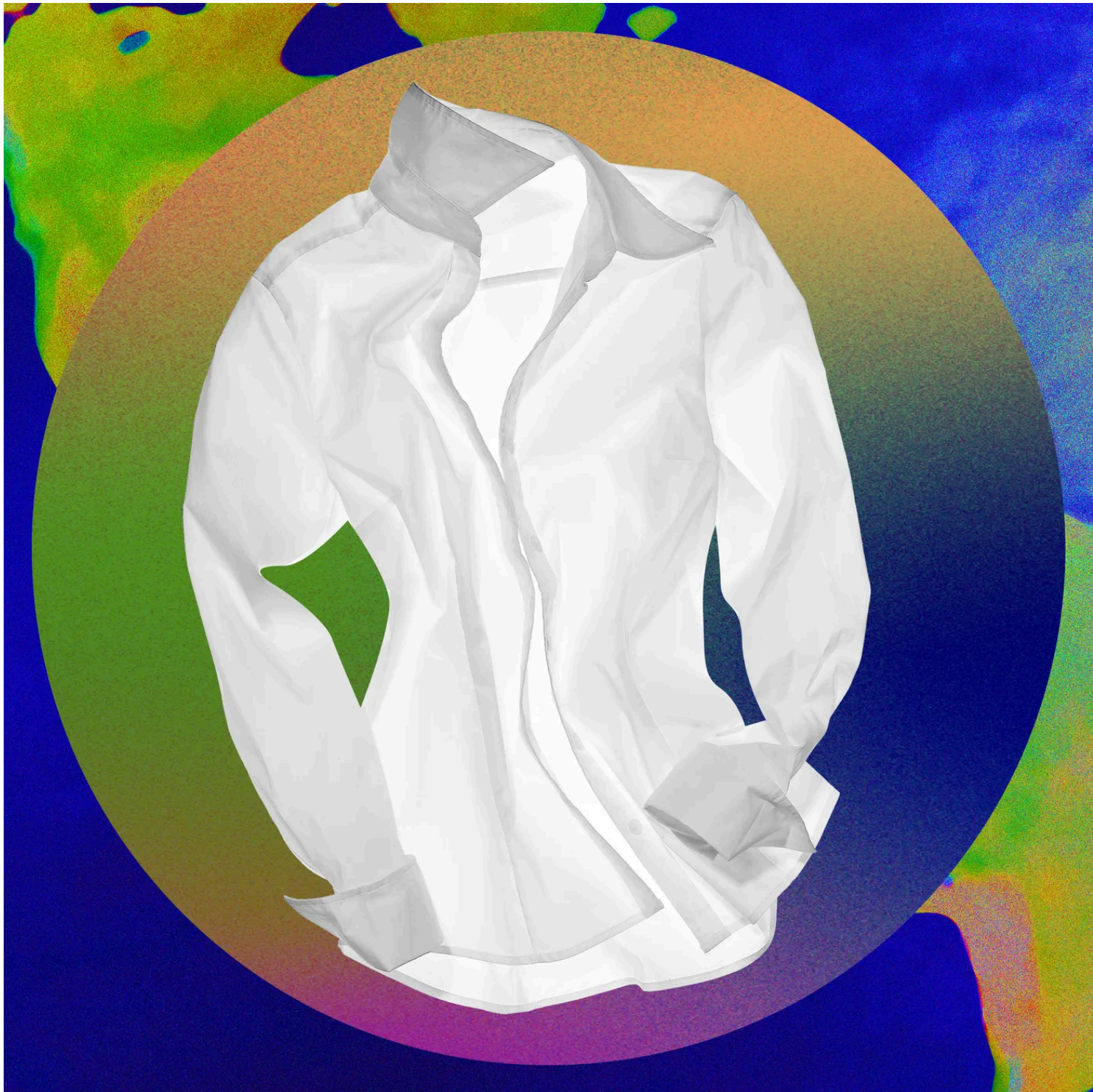


Photo-Illustration: by The Cut; Photos: Getty Images

So you want to buy a new thing, but you don’t want to contribute to the truly horrifying data you’ll find if you Google “fashion environmental impact.” What do you do?

If you’re at all interested in sustainability, you’ve probably heard a version of this phrase: “The most sustainable \_\_\_\_ is the one you already own.” True, but not always practical, especially when it comes to clothing: Style evolves, financial circumstances evolve, and you want to keep up and have a shiny new thing. The fashion industry, however, must slow down. According to

a recent report from Bloomberg, fashion is responsible for up to 10 percent of global carbon-dioxide emissions and a fifth of yearly global plastic production.

The next best thing to wearing the clothes you already have is what the fashion industry is calling “conscious consumption.”<sup>1</sup> We generally associate high cost with high quality, but that is increasingly not at all the case.

Amanda Lee McCarty, a fashion buyer who hosts the Clotheshorse podcast, worked for more than 15 years as a buyer, primarily in fast fashion — and had a front-row seat to what she calls the “fast-fashionification” of the entire industry. She says that after the 2008 recession, customers wanted discounts, and if regular retailers wouldn’t provide them, Forever21 would.

The workaround, says McCarty, was to price items high with a plan to sell the majority of units later on at a discount — meaning lower and lower manufacturing costs. “Immediately, fabric went out the window,” she says. “Everything became lower quality.”

McCarty says this effect has permeated the industry, even touching luxury fashion brands. Which is why today, an “investment piece” isn’t as simple as buying something expensive. Even if it was, spending a lot on even one clothing item isn’t accessible to everyone, and neither is sizing from many sustainable brands. What, then, *should* we be looking for? There’s no single right answer, but there are a million ways to be a little bit better.

## Look carefully at the label: fibers and fabrics.

**Choose natural fibers**<sup>2</sup> — cotton, linen, silk, wool, hemp, etc. — which will last the longest in your closet. Specifically, silk was found to be the longest-lasting fabric in terms of how long it remained in use, with wool in second place. That’s partly because these fabrics can also go the longest in between washes, which helps keep them in good condition. When they do wear out, natural fabrics are biodegradable and recyclable. (By comparison, polyester will last the longest on our planet, according to a report from this year.)

Erin Beatty, the founder of Rentravage, says she likes to look for hemp and jute because they’re regenerative crops. She particularly likes the hemp clothing from brands like Jungmaven and For Days.



**Jungmaven Cascade Jacket**  
\$275

BUY AT JUNGMAVEN



**For Days Organic Poplin Oversized Button Down**  
\$88

BUY AT FOR DAYS





Rentravage Dear Prudence Skirt

\$695

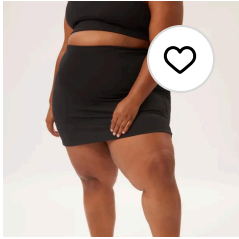
BUY AT RENTRAYSAGE

For Rebecca Burgess, the founder and director of the nonprofit Fibershed and a co-author of *Fibershed: Growing a Movement of Farmers, Fashion Activists, and Makers for a New Textile Economy*, it’s about looking to support the local farming community, specifically American-made fabrics. “I’m looking for 100 percent wool, or 100 percent cotton and traceability back to the farm,” she says. “Where I live in California, cotton and wool are the predominant fibers that we produce. Any natural fiber that’s bio-regionally specific I would advocate for.”

There’s also a category of fibers that aren’t plastic but aren’t entirely natural either. Viscose is a fiber derived from wood pulp and treated with the chemicals sodium hydroxide and carbon disulfide. There are a few issues with viscose: the process of creating it is wasteful and pollutes the environment, and viscose production is a contributor to deforestation, according to Good on You. However, it is ultimately biodegradable, which is a positive thing.

Recently, Eco Vero — a viscose that uses a more environmentally responsible, low-impact production process — was launched, so some inroads are being made to improve the carbon footprint of this type of semi-synthetic.<sup>3</sup>

**Look for eco-fabrics<sup>4</sup>:** The details of how a fiber was produced matter — there are more and less sustainable ways to produce natural fibers like cotton and silk, and the same is true for biodegradable semi-synthetics. For example, silk production can be harmful in terms of both emissions and the killing of silkworms, but you can look for Ahimsa silk, which preserves the worm. And there are certifications for ethical and sustainable production processes that you can keep an eye out for. When in doubt, Caric recommends looking for the GOTS, or global organic textile standard, certification, which has the most stringent environmental requirements. There are new alternatives to plastic-based fabrics being created as we speak; for example, “vegan leather” has historically been made with pure petroleum-derived plastic, but innovative materials like mushroom leather and pineapple leather show a lot of promise.



Girlfriend Collective Sport Skort

\$72

BUY AT GIRLFRIEND COLLECTIVE



Pact Cool-Stretch Tank

\$20

BUY AT PACT



Santos by Monica Amelia Mini Baguette  
\$315

BUY AT SANTOS BY MÓNICA

**Google is your friend:** Not all brands provide detailed information about how the fabric was produced, but all clothing manufacturers are required to include an inside tag that breaks down the fiber content of a garment by percentage. Kate Caric of [Sustainable Outfits](#), who is based in London, points out that a lot of brands — fast-fashion brands in particular — intentionally make labels confusing. There are many names for plastic, so it’s always a good idea to Google the words you don’t recognize.

## Take a pause before adding to cart.

If we shift our thinking so that buying a pair of jeans is treated like a years-long commitment or a valued investment, not a whim, we’re much more likely to keep the things we buy and wear the things we have. Caric says that, after evaluating the ethics of a purchase, she prioritizes the clothes that make her happy — including trends. “If you really like that trend, and you’re gonna wear it in two years, that’s great,” she says. “People find a lot of joy in clothing. It’s something that we do every day, and it should feel good.”

Beatty agrees it’s the garments you wear one or two times that are the problem: “It’s really about, *What are those pieces that will define your look over and over?*” Part of that is considering how you’ll care for a piece of clothing before you buy it; for example, is it dry-clean only? If you don’t have an ecofriendly dry-cleaner in your area, maybe buying that item doesn’t make sense.

For McCarty, instead of buying on impulse, she takes the time to envision how and where the piece will fit into her wardrobe. “You will be surprised how that exercise will cut a lot of really shoddy, unsustainable clothing out of your life immediately.”

## Support small, ideally local, businesses who are transparent about their practices.

At the end of Bill McKibben’s [Eaarth](#) — one of the more optimistic books I’ve read on the climate crisis — he concludes that, basically, our imminent future is a return to more localized, smaller-scale economic models. Burgess agrees: Staying local is the key to sustainable shopping. “I want to support my own farming and ranching community, because I want to see them become less reliant on export economies,” she says. “I want to incentivize growers, through my purchasing choices, to take care of my local environment.”

Abrima Erwiah — professor, sustainable-fashion expert, and cofounder of [Studio 189](#) — takes a similar approach. Though she does buy from larger sustainable brands like [Eileen Fisher](#), [Brother Vellies](#), and [Mara Hoffman](#), she tends to seek out the small businesses in upstate New York. “I like that you can go there and see what they’re doing,” she says.



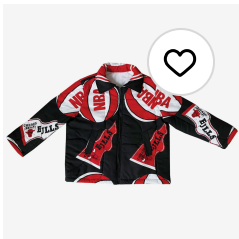
The work she does now is informed by the time she spent volunteering and living with relatives in Ghana, which helped her rethink her own approach to making purchases. Her close ties with garment professionals helped her see how every part of the process, from farm to outfit, is connected. “In a place like Ghana that gets so many secondhand goods, you realize what happens to your stuff when you no longer want it.”

When a brand makes the effort to trace exactly where its clothes are coming from and to be transparent about their practices, it’s an indication of solid core values. If you’re shopping in person, Erwiah says it’s a good idea to ask questions about its ethical and sustainable practices. It’s one of the best ways to evaluate for yourself whether its clothing is worth investing in. Even if a brand doesn’t have all the answers, being asked might prompt it to change that — if it’s a small business, there’s a good chance you’re talking to someone who has some level of influence over business practices. And for a larger brand, if employees are often being asked about sustainability, over time they may recognize it’s a priority for customers and make changes. Realistically, a lot of shopping now happens online. Something Caric always looks for is whether a brand is visiting its factories and if they’ve included information on their website about the wages they pay their employees. If you have more questions, it never hurts to send an email.

## Look for thoughtfully recycled clothing.

*Recycled* is one of the most common buzzwords used to greenwash<sup>5</sup> fast fashion; recycled polyester, in particular, can be problematic. But according to Erwiah, it’s all about designing with intention in mind. She cites the cradle-to-cradle<sup>6</sup> philosophy. It’s great to turn plastic bottles into activewear, but what can they become after that? Maybe it needs to remain the thing that it is and remain in use for as long a life cycle as possible; “Sometimes it’s better to not change it,” says Erwiah. “If it’s a workout pant, maybe it’s about reusing it and giving it a second life versus putting a lot of resources into creating something else. There’s not a one-size-fits-all solution.”

When Beatty decided to start Rentravage, she focused on recycling what already exists, using vintage garments, deadstock<sup>7</sup> fabrics, and other already-circulating materials — and she’s constantly finding gems, like those disposable T-shirts. “One of the worst things for the environment are these single wear T-shirts that are being made for this marathon or whatever,” says Beatty. “Often, you can find really great colors. We cut them up and they look adorable.” Many of those T-shirts are a cotton-poly blend, but since they already exist and should therefore stay in circulation as clothing for as long as possible, Beatty tries to reuse them because they won’t age as quickly. If you no longer have use for a piece of recycled clothing on your body, you can upcycle<sup>8</sup> it for your home. “I’ve seen people literally turn dresses into napkins,” says Beatty.



**Series - Puffer - Supply Your Own**

\$280

BUY AT THE SERIES



Re/Done 70s Patch Jean No. 28PJ13013

\$595

BUY AT RE/DONE



Mansur Gavriel Upcycled Woven Mini Bucket Bag

\$545

BUY AT MANSUR GAVRIEL

When in doubt, shop secondhand.

When shopping secondhand, you don’t always have access to brand ethics or even fiber content, in some cases. However, giving new life to a piece of clothing that’s already floating around in the world, headed eventually toward a landfill, is always a sustainable choice.

There are ways to evaluate quality and lasting potential even in a secondhand shop, says Caric. “Some of the things that I look for off the bat are straight stitching<sup>9</sup> and binded seams.<sup>10</sup>” For denim, Caric says to look for two things: that it’s cut on the selvage<sup>11</sup> and that the inner and outer seams are double stitched<sup>12</sup>. These are all methods that strengthen the garment so that it lasts as long as possible before needing repairs.

Once you’ve made a purchase, treat it well.

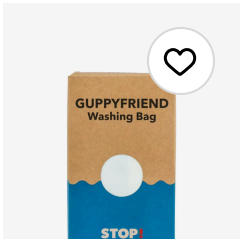
Buying a piece of clothing comes with the responsibility of that item’s life cycle — which means that once we’ve gone through all this and actually made the purchase, we should take good care of it. For synthetic fabrics specifically, the laundry process is complicated. It’s a good idea to invest in a filter bag<sup>13</sup> to stop microplastics from being released into the water system, and if you’re willing to spend a little more and take on an installation, you can get a filter for your washing machine<sup>14</sup>. If you can, avoid the dryer entirely. “If in doubt, wash it on delicate, and air dry. It’s the best thing you can do,” says Beatty.



Girlfriend Collective Microfiber Filter

\$45

BUY AT GIRLFRIEND COLLECTIVE



Guppyfriend Washing Bag

\$35

BUY AT REI



Filtrol™  
\$160

BUY AT FILTROL

McCarty also recommends reading the care labels inside the garment. Once you familiarize yourself with the symbols and the materials, you’ll start to know what *actually* must be dry-cleaned, and what will be fine with a hand-wash/line-dry situation. McCarty also recommends getting the book *Handy Household Hints From Heloise*, which she often sees in thrift stores for under \$5, and learning basic mending skills, like replacing buttons and patching holes. But also, know when you’re out of your depth; sometimes, it’s worth investing in a tailor. After getting the lining replaced in one of her vintage coats, McCarty is confident she’ll be wearing it for the next 20 years at least.

Another option for renewing your stained or worn out clothing: dye. “Never underestimate the power of black dye,” says Beatty. “That’s another secret. We do that every once in a while. It works wonders.”

### Our experts:

- Amanda Lee McCarty, fashion buyer and host of Clotheshorse podcast
- Erin Beatty, founder of Rentravage
- Rebecca Burgess, founder and director of the nonprofit Fibershed and a co-author of Fibershed: Growing a Movement of Farmers, Fashion Activists, and Makers for a New Textile Economy
- Kate Caric, founder of Sustainable Outfits
- Abrima Erwiah, professor, sustainable-fashion expert, and cofounder of Studio 189

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