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## Hemp, from hippie to hip

It's not just for the stoner set. Stella McCartney, Giorgio Armani and Calvin Klein are among the designers incorporating hemp textiles into their fashions. It's a versatile material said to be easy on the environment.



SPECIALTY: Hempwise in Santa Barbara sells hemp clothing, as does Urban Outfitters, Fred Segal and other retailers. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

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By Susan Carpenter, Los Angeles Times

April 18, 2010

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It's durable. It's versatile. And when it's used in textiles, it's easier on the environment than, say, cotton. Yet its cannabis connection has slowed its widespread use. We're talking about hemp, and, by extension, hemp fashion — a concept that seems like an oxymoron but is quietly being embraced by the mainstream as major designers and clothing retailers take on the material that has long been equated with burlap and granola-munching hippies.

Stella McCartney, Giorgio Armani and Calvin Klein are among the designers who've seen through the smoke and incorporated hemp textiles into their lines. And Whole Foods, Urban Outfitters, American Rag and Fred Segal are some of the better-known stores selling fashion-forward hemp brands, such as Livy Outernational, Jung Maven, Satori and Hemp Hoodlamb, all of which exploit hemp's various attributes in chic items that run the gamut from technical outerwear to

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dresses that would hardly be the first choice of the dreadlocks-and-dooie crowd.

"Hemp clothing has definitely come a long way," says Al Espino, the owner of two hemp clothing boutiques called Hempwise in Santa Barbara and Isla Vista. "Ten years ago, a lot of the hemp clothing played on the connection with marijuana with labels saying 'contains marijuana fabric.' There was a lot of confusion and I think it held back the industry. Now there are a lot of small [fashion-forward] companies. It's gone from a niche market with an illegal drug connection to appealing to the organic and natural crowd."

Hemp is an industrial, nonpsychoactive plant that is part of the cannabis family; the fibers are different and stronger than a marijuana plant, making it suitable for textiles.

What's drawing designers to hemp textiles are their natural performance attributes and their low impact on the environment. Hemp fibers are highly absorbent, UV resistant, antimicrobial and long lasting. Growing it also requires less water and fewer pesticides than does cotton. Growing hemp in the U.S. has been prohibited since the '50s, so most of the hemp used by American clothing designers comes from China. "It's so high value and so much lower impact in every other way that it eclipses the carbon generated through shipping," said Isaac Nichelson, founder of the Santa Monica-based hemp clothing line Livity Outernational.

Eco-chic is a rising tide in the fashion world, and the use of hemp is swelling — aided by technological advances that have produced appealing and increasingly refined hemp textile blends, the most common being hemp and organic cotton and hemp fibers woven with recycled plastic, both of which soften a material that can be coarse.

Still, hemp's illicit image is hard to shed. Two teenage girls read the sign for Hempwise and giggled before walking into the shop on a recent weekday to peruse the women's section, which is stocked with slinky hemp-blend T-shirts and Capri pants, and asymmetrical mini-dresses. All of it was set out in displays that play up the "eco" with only the merest hint of "Rasta." A mint green Vespa was parked inside the doorway on bamboo flooring that led to displays of backpacks and wallets, hats and menswear — all made from hemp.

One of the brands sold at Hempwise is Livity, which Nichelson started after a friend pointed out that the materials he was using as a clothing designer weren't in sync with his environmental beliefs.

"I was using nylon, PVC, Teflon — every toxin known to man wrapped up in a garment that we were putting on ourselves and dropping in a landfill later," said Nichelson, who started to look for alternatives and found one in hemp. Eight years later, he's running a multimillion-dollar business that sells outdoor-wear to Whole Foods and Urban Outfitters. On Thursday — Earth Day — he'll be opening his first branded store on Lincoln Boulevard in Santa Monica, so strong is his belief that hemp is "headed straight to the mainstream. Eventually it won't even be perceptible. Hemp is as high performance and functional and as cool and flashy and sexy as any conventional product, but it doesn't impact the planet in terrible ways. More and more, it's going to be incorporated into things where the end user doesn't even know or care it's there. They're just reaping the benefits."

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