

NOVEMBER 2021

Fabric Dyes and their Impact on the Environment

Have you wondered how your clothes are dyed? You may have heard of vegetable dyes, but what are they and why are they different?

The textile industry is the no. 2 polluter of clean water (after agricultural activities) and one of the most chemically intensive industry in the world. The environmental and human health impacts for those that make the clothes has increased because of the sheer volume of new clothes that are made. Not only does the process involve huge amounts of water, the dyes themselves often contain harmful or toxic chemicals such as "sulphur, ammonia, chlorine which is a known carcinogen, naphthol, vat dyes, nitrates, acetic acid, soaps, enzymes chromium compounds and heavy metals like copper, arsenic, lead, cadmium, mercury, nickel, and cobalt and certain auxiliary chemicals all collectively make the textile effluent (discharge) highly toxic", according to Rita Kant writing in Natural Science (4.1).

But what can we do about this?

You can look for the 'Bluesign' logo on new clothes. This is a certification from a Swiss group which monitors every step in the supply chain—from chemical formulation to finished product—to keep chemicals of concern out of the process. They help companies choose less harmful chemicals, reduce water, energy and chemical use, fit ventilation systems to protect workers, reduce water and air emissions and apply strict chemical safety standards to the final product.

You can also choose clothes that are coloured using vegetable dyes. These are non toxic, made from plants, and spent dye

materials can even be composted and returned to the soil! Readymade clothes are currently only available from a few suppliers, we are lucky to have one in Wellington; Chandni Chowk. They tend to be more expensive than mass produced clothes, however you can dye your own clothes or natural fabric for free by collecting dye plants yourself, or revive old clothes for a little cash by purchasing ready-to-use vegetable dyes. Check out “Botanical Inks” for more info.

While it's great to ensure new clothes are made with less polluting dyes, there is still a carbon footprint to everything new we buy. So the cheapest option on this occasion is the best for the planet:- making what you have last longer by mending them, which you can do for free by taking them to The Repair Cafe on Saturday 6th November 10am-12noon at the Baptist Church Hall, South Street. If you need more clothes then check out second-hand before resorting to new things, and make sure you take your unwanted clothes to charity shops or sell them on eBay etc rather than throwing them away, and they could be really loved and appreciated by the next person to wear them.

By Helen Gillingham