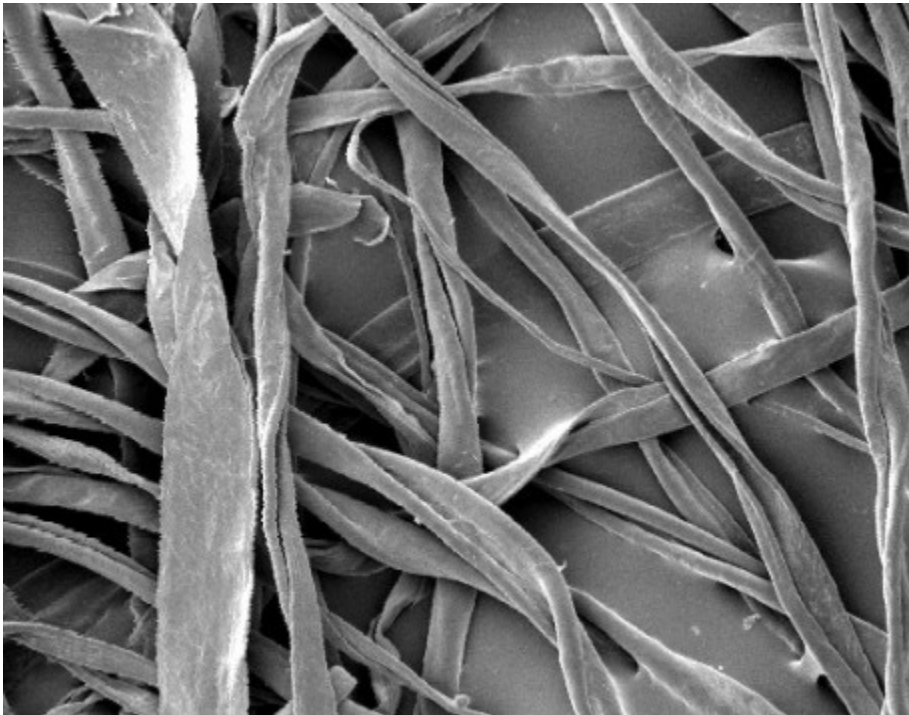


<http://alabamachanin.com/journal/2012/04/the-heart-organic-cotton-qa-with-lynda-grose/#more-16613>



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## [The Heart: Organic Cotton Q&A with Lynda Grose](#)

Last week, as we started to learn about [organic cottonseed](#), we discovered that there are significant challenges associated with seed supply. Our conversation began with industry leaders, as we had our fair share of questions. This week we continue our discussion on the process of growing organic cotton in an interview with [Lynda Grose](#).

Lynda has been involved with sustainable fashion and textiles since 1995 when she co-founded [ESPRIT's ecollection](#), which was the first ecologically responsible clothing line developed by a major corporation. Lynda currently serves as assistant professor in CCA's Fashion Design Program and works with the Sustainable Cotton Project in California, and many more businesses and non-profits.

Lynda Grose, an inspired activist and friend for years – a part of the heart and soul of Alabama Chanin.

AC: What is the [Sustainable Cotton Project](#) (SCP), and what is your involvement?

LG: The Sustainable Cotton Project is a non-profit farm-based program in California working with farmers to help reduce the toxicity of cotton cultivation. My role is to communicate the benefits of

SCP's farm program and communicate it effectively to the industry, so that they consider using [Cleaner Cotton TM](#) in their clothing lines.

AC: Can you tell us a little more about Cleaner Cotton TM?

LG: Cleaner Cotton TM disallows the most toxic chemicals used on cotton and requires farmers to use non-genetically modified seed. Participating farmers also register in SCP's program, attend informational farm days, link with mentor growers, and use biological means as a first resort to control pests. The fiber is grown 'locally' in rural California near Fresno.

Our farmers grow two types of cotton: Acala and Pima. Long staple and extra long [staple length](#), respectively.

AC: Where do you see the organic cotton industry going?

LG: [The growing of] organic cotton is following the same route as the textile industry: The areas of most growth are in countries where labor costs are cheapest. Recently, for example, India overtook Turkey as the largest producer of organic cotton. There are pluses and minuses for brands working overseas. Though there are some direct economic benefits, overseas production is more challenging to monitor and standards are more challenging to enforce. However, there are several international organic certification agencies and there is reciprocity on the standards.

AC: What are your personal thoughts on "organic"?

LG: I see organic cotton as a tool.... to transition chemical intensive farming to biological systems.... rather than an end goal.

In the Southern U.S. for example where insect pressure is high because of humid conditions, chemical use on cotton is intensive. [BT cotton](#) has been very effective at reducing chemical use in this area. But long-term, there is a risk that insects will develop genetic resistance to genetically modified BT cotton, so it's only common sense to develop alternative cotton growing systems (like organic and Cleaner Cotton TM) that are non-genetically modified, as a safety net in case the efficacy of GM cotton becomes undermined due to its overuse.

AC: So it seems there are some difficulties met in the organic cotton industry.

LG: Well, nothing is black and white, right or wrong, good or bad. Organic is a really effective tool to reduce chemical use in developing nations where chemicals are used and hand labor is relatively cheap.

Organic is not a relevant tool in countries where chemicals were never used to begin with...that would be like using a hammer to drive in a nail that is already in!

And organic is a limited tool in California, where labor costs are high, which results in the fiber being priced beyond what companies can pay.

And if your concerns were less about chemicals and more about water use, then you would use a different tool – water saving strategies.

If you were looking to achieve a fair price to the farmer, the tool would be ‘fair trade’.

Our understanding of sustainability is maturing and the conversation about ‘sustainability’ nowadays is much more nuanced than it used to be. We now know we need a whole toolbox of strategies and to hone our skills, which are used at the appropriate time and place to achieve maximum ecological and social gains.

There are many issues to respond to (not just toxicity, but water, labor, local economies, energy use, carrying capacity of the land to support economic activity etc). In the marketplace, depending on what issues any given company has chosen to take on, these issues can be seen as in competition with each other. When they are complementary. We need to be using all the tools we can to support the move towards sustainability.

AC: As a non-profit, how does SCP work with the farmers?

LG: SCP is a non-profit, and receives funding from the [US EPA](#) and [California State Water Resources Control Board](#), and private foundations. We work with scientists at [University of California \(UC\) Cooperative Extension](#) and UC Integrated Pest Management to help implement their research in the field. SCP provides a field scout to monitor for insects, and advise farmers on how to respond to an infestation using reduced risk methods. SCP also hosts field days so participants in the Cleaner Cotton™ program can exchange information and experiences farmer-to-farmer.

And we connect to companies by doing presentations in company HQ’s and by bringing representatives on farm tours to meet and ask questions of farmers directly. This way, polarized conversations about cotton or farming dissipate as people start thinking about collaborating to bring a new type of cotton through the supply chain and to market.

This is highly unusual in a commodity fiber system, where farmers are used to seeing their cotton baled up with a USDA-assigned tracking number. And that’s the last they see of it.

And brands are used to operating in finished garments or ‘units’.

And the piece of the supply chain between fiber and finished garment is opaque. By bringing people together, throughout the supply chain, new relationships, collaborations and ideas percolate to link farmers to markets and vice versa.

AC: So local plays a very important role for SCP.

LG: Yes, this is very important to SCP. In rural California, there is 25% unemployment. It's much higher than the national average. And these communities depend on revenue from farming.

AC: As a teacher, how do you educate your students in textile and fashion sustainability?

LG: I've taught fashion and sustainability at CCA since 1999 and I use cotton as a vehicle for introducing the students to 'thinking in systems'. They research different aspects of cotton cultivation (water, toxicity, labor, GM, etc.) and report back to the class. They also join the SCP farm tours as space permits. This direct experiential learning is very powerful. Everyone remembers the feeling of visiting the farms, the landscape and the integrity of the farmers.

This semester we also have an interdisciplinary local fiber incubator class, which I co-teach with Mimi Robinson from "Bridging Cultures Through Design." In this class, students visit wool ranchers in Sonoma County as well as cotton farmers in Fresno County, compare the two and then develop products to add value to those fibers.

I teach both seminar and studio classes on sustainability. The first is research based, where students research the impacts of different fibers, and consumer behaviors and then look at what is being addressed in the market and what isn't. I encourage students to 'find the gap' and to come up with innovative ideas to address the gaps they have identified. Students have the opportunity to express some of their ideas in 3D form and we enter these into competitions and reflect on what new business models might emerge from the prototypes.

AC: What challenges do you foresee for the future of sustainable textiles?

LG: Our industry and our design profession are completely dependent upon maintaining a steady supply of material resources to manufacture and sell the products we make. And our businesses are completely dependent upon growing larger each year....selling more material resources, faster. The real challenge is to innovate new business models, which decouple monetary income from material units. How many different ways can we participate in fashion and make a living?

Alabama Chanin's varied streams of income are examples of this new way of thinking. You sell some material-based items, are commissioned to make others, but Natalie now also runs "making" [workshops](#). Alabama Chanin supplies materials and notions to the DIY community so they can make their own items, and you sell your books and the movie! It's an example of a 'shallow and wide' business model, vs. a 'narrow and deep' model. I see many more alternate models of business emerging along side the existing material growth model.

AC: Lynda, thank you so much for taking the time to share your work and thoughts on organic fibers and sustainability. We learned a lot and will see you in [California](#) soon...