

Smart Ways To Make Your Wardrobe Sustainable | Earth 911

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Reducing the environmental impact of your wardrobe can be really complicated. Choosing the greenest fabric is a frustrating exercise full of unknowns and tradeoffs.

Lifecycle analyses of most [natural](#) and [synthetic](#) fibers are rare, and supply chains in the fashion industry are so convoluted that most brands don't even know where and how their own clothes were made. Sustainable [fashion brands](#) that use [eco-friendly fabrics](#) can be hard to find and tend to present limited options at high prices.

Despite these challenges, there are smart ways to reduce the impact of the clothes in your closet.

The Basics

Conscious consumers already have a reliable bag of tricks that work just as well for [clothes](#) as for vacuum cleaners or any other product.

- Buy less
- Buy used
- Repair instead of replacing
- Recycle

When you're talking about food, buying less means purchasing only what you can eat. For your wardrobe, it might mean buying one high-quality sweater instead of three fast-fashion ones. Or it might mean resisting the urge to buy a little black dress that is only slightly different from the two you already have at home.

In an extension of the [cost-per-wear](#) fashion principle, every article of clothing is greener when it's second-hand. Second-hand clothing still hasn't completely thrown off its connotations of poverty and shabbiness, but savvy shoppers know that thrift stores are treasure troves where even [business attire](#) can be found inexpensively and in good condition. High-end consignment shops and online resale sites keep second-hand options open for those who can't bear to dig through bargain bins.

Returning to the concept of cost-per-wear, paying to repair ripped or otherwise damaged clothing and [reselling](#) clothing that no longer fits can be as economical as it is environmental. And when clothes are genuinely unusable, avoid [common mistakes](#) and find the right way to [recycle](#) them.

Smarter Shopping

If you can find and afford [green fashion brands](#), they are a good choice when you

must purchase new. But according to a Macarthur Report on textiles, eliminating substances of concern in manufacturing and eliminating the release of microfibers during use should be the [top goals for the textile industry](#), regardless of brand or price point. Once celebrated as a sustainable recycling solution for plastics, synthetic fabrics – especially fleece – are now known to release [microplastics](#) during wear and washing. These microplastics present a growing threat to the environment and human health. Despite the many advantages of the fabric, it's best to avoid synthetic fleece and other microfiber fabrics.

It's impossible to make informed consumer choices about most other chemicals because of the opacity of the textile industry; consumers rarely have access to information about the chemicals used in the production of the clothes they purchase.

However, it is both possible and advisable to avoid chemically treated clothing. [Flame retardants](#) such as perfluorohexane sulfonate are toxic and may bioaccumulate. Unfortunately, regulations require some consumer products to be treated with flame retardants. Where possible, substitute tightly woven natural fibers like wool and silk, which do not melt and are difficult to ignite.

Stain and water [repellents](#) such as perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS) are persistent in the environment, bioaccumulate, and have hormone-disrupting properties. Where possible, avoid PFC-treated fabrics and use [Nikwax](#), naturally water-resistant fabrics like wool, or even old-fashioned [waxed cotton](#) instead.

Smarter Upkeep

[Eco-friendly stain removers](#) like talcum powder and club soda are often more effective than chemical treatments. Simple repairs like hemming and replacing buttons instead of replacing whole garments is another obvious way to extend their useful life. But people toss more clothing due to general wear than damage.

And much of that takes place in the [laundry](#) rather than during wear. Keep your clothes longer by only washing them when they are actually dirty. Front loading washing machines are gentler on clothes than top loaders. Washing in [cold water](#) doesn't just save energy, it minimizes shrinkage and fading. Likewise, hanging garments to dry instead of using the clothes dryer helps your wardrobe last longer.

You can safely wash many items labeled “dry-clean only” at home using these gentler methods. But some items absolutely must be sent to the cleaners. For these items, find a green cleaner that does not use perchloroethylene (aka perc) or hydrocarbon solvents.

Aside from protecting the garments themselves, your laundry choices have environmental impacts. Use eco-friendly [laundry detergents](#) to keep harmful chemicals out of your wardrobe, your home, and downstream waterways. If you own [microfiber clothing](#) (and who doesn't?) wash those items in a [microfiber filter bag](#) on a cooler, faster laundry cycle.

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