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# Vegan Alternatives to Cashmere



By **Gemma Alexander**

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To many outside of the environmental movement, sustainable living looks a lot like ascetic self-denial. But many sustainable brands are working to change that image, offering stylish [eco-cool products](#) that prove low-impact living doesn't have to mean wearing a [hairshirt](#). At least, not the uncomfortable kind. Among the latest sustainable designs for luxury products is a herd of new vegan cashmere alternatives.

## Cashmere

Real [cashmere](#) is a type of [wool fabric](#) made from the hair of specific breeds of goat rather than sheep. Cashmere is soft enough to wear against the skin without itching and so fine that it can be made into thin, fitted garments, in

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contrast to bulky wools. A single sweater requires the<sup>CLOSE</sup> annual fleece of up to six goats, adding rarity to the list of characteristics that make cashmere a high-end, luxury item.

Cashmere is named for the region where European merchants first encountered it – Kashmir in Central Asia. Today most cashmere is produced in China, with Mongolia a distant second at 20% of production. As with other wools, cashmere is obtained by shearing or for higher quality, combing. Neither of these processes kills the goat and both can be done without harming it. However, cashmere is not necessarily a [cruelty-free](#) product, and it has serious environmental repercussions.

## Impacts of Cashmere

There are minimal to no [animal welfare laws](#) in China and Mongolia. Goats are slaughtered once the quality of their hair decreases with age, living as little as a third of their natural lifespan. Rough handling is common, and shearing can leave open wounds. A 2019 investigation by PETA [showed](#) that combing is not the spa-like grooming treatment people imagine.

Still, as animal products go, cashmere is relatively humane. Cashmere goats live longer lives than many livestock species. They are usually allowed to graze free-range in their native habitat. They are only combed or sheared once per year, usually in spring when they naturally shed.

Although small-scale goat herding can be sustainable, the [cashmere industry is not](#). In order to meet growing demand, herds have grown to unsustainable sizes. Overgrazing negatively impacts wildlife, damages soil, and contributes to [desertification](#) on the dry grasslands where the goats are raised.



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## Better Cashmere

Secondhand and recycled cashmere (like Stella McCartney's [Re.Verso](#)) are better choices. For new cashmere purchases, shoppers can also look for cashmere that conforms to the [IWTO Specifications for Wool Sheep Welfare](#). In January 2020, the Trade by Aid Foundation launched [The Good Cashmere Standard](#), which covers the Five Freedoms of animal welfare as well as the that of workers in the industry. [Kering](#), which supplies many luxury brands, and are two companies known for their attempts to produce cashmere more sustainably. But since high demand is responsible for driving this product toward crueler and more unsustainable practices, even wealthy cashmere lovers should treat cashmere as a rare luxury and look for alternatives for the bulk of their wardrobe.

## Vegan Cashmere

Many vegan fabrics aim to replicate the desirable qualities of cashmere. Although the exact properties of each alternative fabric vary, most vegan cashmeres can claim to match the softness of cashmere, and for that reason are often marketed as an alternative to silk as well.

### Bamboo

Bamboo-based cashmere is almost as expensive as quality cashmere, but it's hypoallergenic, hand-washable, and ostensibly lower-carbon. The brand [attitude](#) sells loungewear and bedding made from this material, while [Kokun](#) blends real cashmere with bamboo for sweaters.

### Soy

Although marketing it as vegan cashmere is new, [soy-based fabric](#) is not. Leftover soybean pulp from tofu production has been used to make a fabric that is soft, biodegradable, pills less than cashmere wool, and is machine washable. [Soybeans](#) have their own environmental impact, but using waste material is always a plus. Brands that sell soy-based cashmere clothing include [KD New York](#) and the French company [Lo Neel](#).

### Calotropis

Calotropis is a type of milkweed that grows in Asia. A company called [Faborg](#) uses fiber from the stems and seedpods of Calotropis. Blended with organic cotton, they manufacture a cashmere-like fabric they call Weganool. They recycle water from fiber processing to color the fabric with natural dyes. The first products made from Weganool are available from a company called [Infantium Victoria](#).

### Viscose

Viscose (aka rayon) is made from cellulosic fibers. It can be blended with polyester and polyamide, which are [synthetic fibers](#), to create a cashmere-like knit. Unlike other vegan cashmeres, this fabric will not be fully biodegradable, and the synthetic components will bump up the carbon impact of the product. But the brand [Apparis](#), which uses this blend, does work closely with its factories to ensure fair labor standards; has strong waste reduction practices; and uses organic dyes. Luxury brand [niLuu](#) makes vegan loungewear using the regenerated cellulose fiber cupro without any synthetics. While the widely used fabrics branded as Tencel and Lyocell are not marketed as an alternative to cashmere, they do make very soft knits and are among the [better choices](#) for sustainable natural fibers.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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