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Shopping for Clean Jeans



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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For clothing companies looking to make the fashion industry more sustainable, denim is an obvious place to start. Jeans are among the most-worn items of clothing in American closets. And denim manufacturing has a higher environmental impact than most fabrics. But denim is also a durable fabric made from [natural fibers](#). Denim clothes tend to be classics that people are happy to hang on to for a long time. When companies make denim with organic agriculture and more environmentally friendly manufacturing processes, denim can be an important staple in your [sustainable wardrobe](#).

Dirty Denim

Clothing manufacturing has significant environmental impacts at each step in the supply chain. Those supply chains are shockingly opaque – many brands have no idea how or where their clothes are made. In 2022, only [48% of brands](#)

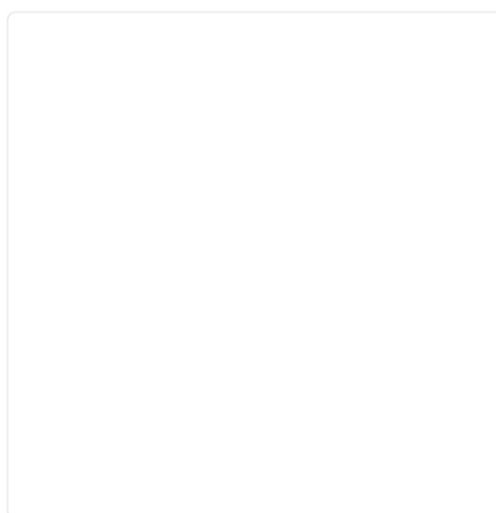
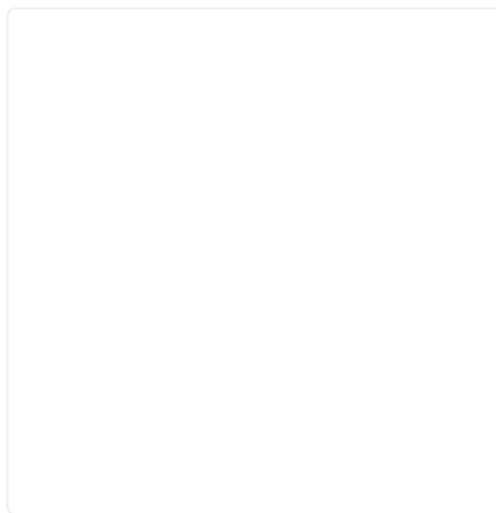
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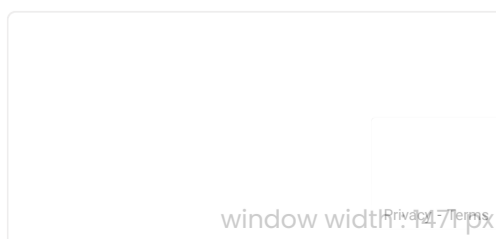
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published their first-tier manufacturers. Only nine of the 250 brands studied achieved a 90% transparency score. Every year, **40 million tons** of textiles are disposed – **up to 20%** of them never even sold.

Growing **cotton** consumes and pollutes vast quantities of water, degrades soil, and generates chemical pollution that harms workers and habitats. Denim is a high impact cotton product, thanks to the additional environmental costs of repeated wash cycles, water pollution from the dyeing process, the use of synthetics like Lycra and spandex in stretch jeans, and the hazardous chemicals that create different washes and finishes. Jeans have some of the biggest footprints in the fashion industry with emissions of **33.4 kilograms CO2-eq** per pair. On average, it takes **1,800 gallons of water** to grow enough cotton to make one pair of jeans.

Amendi

Denim brand **Amendi** is 100% **transparent and traceable**. Customers can use the SKU number to trace a garment's production path through suppliers that have signed Code of Conduct commitments. On each product page, customers can confirm the origin of the garment and the materials used in the fabric, tags, and seams, as well as the water and energy used in manufacturing. They use 100% organic cotton for their non-stretch jeans. They use recycled materials for most denim trims and produce finishes using lasers and wash balls rather than chemical treatments.

Detroit Denim

The environmental focus of **Detroit Denim** is waste reduction. They use a made-to-order model that reduces waste from overproduction. Each pair is customized to meet the client's size, shape, and style preferences, further reducing waste from returns. Their jeans are made to last in Detroit, where they also perform mail-in **repairs and tailoring** to further extend the life of each product.



On average, it takes 1,800 gallons of water to grow enough cotton for just one pair of jeans.

DL1961

A family-owned circular denim manufacturer based in New York, [DL1961](#) uses post-consumer recycled fabrics, renewable fibers like Tencel, and certified organic cotton to make their jeans. Powered by solar panels and a heat recovery system, their closed-loop manufacturing process recycles 98% of the water it uses, so each pair of jeans consumes only 10 gallons of water. They also use safer dyes and chemical-free finishing techniques.

Good American

[Good American](#) is a woman-owned B Corporation that makes denim and other clothing. Although their marketing focus is size inclusivity, they also have a strong [sustainability](#) program. Using a drop model of small batch production reduces deadstock waste of products made from better fabrics, including recycled and organic cotton. Their denim uses a wash process that reduces water usage between 15% to 44% (depending on the finish). Their clothes are produced in factories powered by solar energy.

Slvrlake

To most people, jeans are by definition made from cotton. Sustainability isn't the primary focus of premium denim company, LA-based [Slvrlake](#). But most of their jeans are 100% GOTS certified cotton. And buried among these offerings is a small line of jeans made from [hemp](#) – one of the [best natural fabric](#) choices for sustainability.

Levi's

The biggest companies have the biggest footprints, but when the denim elephant in the room makes a process change, it makes a big impact. [Levi's](#) switched to a processing system they call Water<Less in 2011 that has saved roughly 13 billion liters of water so far. They eliminated PFCs and PFAS from all of their products by 2018. In 2021, they [reported](#) a 66% reduction in [Scope 1 GHG emissions](#), and 22% reduction in supply chain emissions over base year 2016. In 2021, they joined the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Jeans Redesign project.

Denim Shopping

In 2019, the Ellen MacArthur foundation introduced "[The Jeans Redesign](#)," a set of guidelines for jeans makers to move towards circular design and reduce their waste and pollution from their manufacturing processes. When you're shopping for new jeans, look for brands and styles that follow these guidelines:

1. Few or no rivets for easier recycling
2. Raw denim finish and indigo washes to avoid toxic finishing treatments

3. At least 98% but ideally 100% cellulosic fibers (cotton, hemp, or Tencel/lyocell)

Denim is generally a durable fabric that ages well, so it is a very good candidate for second-hand and vintage shopping.

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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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