

KNIT *your* GREENS!

From banana yarns to local wool, all the way to ethical knitting notions, Tamsin Oxford explores eco-friendlier ways to knit.

Loving yarn comes with being a knitter. We all have secret stashes that overflow with bargains, and beauties that we tell ourselves we will knit up 'one day'. But some yarns are not what the planet ordered. Made in factories, they can have travelled for miles before they come through your front door, leaving a huge carbon footprint behind them...

May Linn Bang, owner of Knit With Attitude (knitwithattitude.com), says, "When you are knitting you are creating a unique garment and on a micro level this reduces pollution and the increase in waste, both of which are important green issues. So, when choosing your yarn, why not opt for natural fibres and locally produced yarns?"

Yarns with synthetic fibres are made from petrochemicals which are non-renewable and environmentally destructive, not to mention the effect that their toxic dyes have on rivers and the food chain. In addition, some types of cotton farming

can use a lot of pesticides and herbicides, while sheep used for mass wool production can often suffer from issues such as wool

blindness or heat exhaustion, leading particularly unpleasant lives.

Rachael Matthews, co-founder of ethical knitting store Prick Your Finger (see page 64 for details of all the yarn suppliers we mention), has a wonderfully unusual method of finding out what a yarn is made of before you buy it.

"If you really want to study a yarn before you buy it, ask for a small sample and then set fire to it. Watch it burn and study the ash. If the flames start 'dripping' and the ash feels hard and plastic, that shows the chemical content. If the ash is clean, soft and powdery, then it is more natural. The smell of the burning yarn will also give you a clue."

Happily, nowadays there's a wealth of yarns and tools to choose from that are environmentally friendly, and some of these yarns are extraordinary in every way. Have you ever thought you'd knit a jumper from a banana? How about some sweetcorn?

BUY RENEWABLE

Yarns spun from materials such as bamboo, sugarcane, soya, banana plant and maize (sweetcorn) are available nowadays, and many of these fibres are a by-product of other industries so each skein is helping to reduce waste.

Banana yarn is made from the fibres in the leaves and stems, and whips up into an almost silky knit. Wild Weaves sells hanks of the yarn for around £2.25 for 50g. A sturdy and reliable option is nettle yarn – it is tough, holds its shape well and can be used for knitting or crocheting anything from mesh bags to jumpers. You'll be able to source this from Transrural Trust or Ethnic Crafts.

Maize yarn such as Kollage Corntastic, available from Yarn Box, is very unusual. Corntastic is a



Recycled sari yarn is brilliant for making sturdy bags.

smooth yarn, good for detailed work, while bamboo yarn, available from Prick Your Finger, is also smooth and another popular choice for the ethical knitter. Bamboo yarns are quite widely available now, but not all come from a resource that meets with the Soil Association's stringent guidelines, so it is a good idea to choose a brand that has a proven renewable footprint. Knit With Attitude sell soysilk yarn, which transforms into a lovely knit, alongside sugar cane yarn, an unexpected source of yarn that's a pleasure to work with. Organic Pure Wool sell Soil Association certified wool knitting yarns that comply with Global Organic Textile Standards.



When you choose local wool, you might discover your area has its own breed of sheep.



Yarn spun from banana has a smooth, silky appearance.



Herdwick wool is from tough little Lake District Sheep.

TRY RECYCLED

A yarn that does its bit for the planet but has a more unusual touch is recycled sari yarn. A by-product of sari production in India, this yarn is made by gathering up the loose ends of saris from industrial mills in India and then hand spinning this waste into unique hanks of yarn. Each hank is different from the next so you are guaranteed a very vibrant and unusual knit. It is available from Ethnic Crafts who also offer recycled mulberry silk, a yarn that is handpicked and hand spun by co-operatives in India, and recycled cotton.

More big brands are now bringing out yarns that are partly or wholly spun from recycled fibres: Sirdar Simply Recycled is an aran yarn that

'Have you ever thought you'd knit a jumper from a banana? How about some corn?'

contains 51% recycled cotton (see page 24 for a drape front jacket using it) and Rowan's eco-friendly Purelife range includes the 100% recycled Revive (a blend of cotton, silk and viscose) and 93% recycled wool Renew yarns.

SHOP LOCAL

Maya says that, "All good yarns are labelled with fibre content and place of origin so they should be quite easy to identify." By buying yarns that are locally produced, and this includes yarns made from fleeces of local alpacas or sheep, you are cutting down on your carbon footprint and supporting regional initiatives. Maya's favourite yarn at the moment is BFL Dazzle by The Natural Dye Studio, a Blue Faced Leicester wool dyed using medieval plant dye techniques and certified as a British-produced wool product.

Verity Britton, founder of shop Baa Ram Ewe (baaramewe.co.uk) says, "We encourage customers to use British wool as much as possible as it supports the farming industry in this country and helps with the survival of many of our unique breeds of sheep." By buying locally you are also making sure that your yarn has only travelled a short distance to the store front door, which results in less pollution.

Rowan British Sheep Breeds is a completely British wool, spun in Yorkshire, while Cornish →



Prick Your Finger spin over half their yarns themselves. That's local!

ONE TO READ...

Rare breeds of sheep have interesting coloured fleeces.



Yarns on the shelf at Knit With Attitude – a rainbow of green!

Organic Wool is entirely produced in Cornwall, and is Soil Association certified at every

stage. Garthenor stock over 80 British organic yarns, including some from rare breeds of sheep.

So, to keep your knitting as green as possible try and buy local wherever possible or, if the yarn doesn't quite match what you need, look into ones made from renewable resources or produced via fair trade initiatives that give back to the communities that raise the animals and dye the fibres.

STAYING GREEN

While you lovingly stroke the lush ethical yarn you have now added to your bulging stash, it's time to look into knitting supplies that follow the same environmentally-friendly paths.

"Wood is always better than plastic and metal needles and, as an added bonus, knitting with wooden needles has been proven to add less strain to your joints and muscles," says Maya. Both Knitting with Attitude and Prick Your Finger sell a variety of ethical knitting supplies, including the Takumi range of needles by Clover. The latter have been made without any chemical processes and are from sustainable bamboo supplies.

The Brittany range of birch crochet hooks and knitting needles is created from wood from regulated forests run to strict guidelines (contact Artesano to find your nearest stockist), and you can find the Surina range of needles at Eco Knits. It is worth noting, though, that nabbing needles from charity shops is a great way to reduce waste and won't cost you as much as new ones either. Often, charity shops don't put them on display but will have them if you ask for them. You can also create your own by using old chopsticks or buy locally made supplies that may cost more, but will last longer and support the community.

So, there you have it, plenty of beautiful yarns and accessories that will have you saving the planet while enjoying your favourite hobby! ●

WHERE TO GET YOUR ECO-FRIENDLY YARNS

ARTESANO

Distribute Fair Trade yarn and eco-friendly wooden needles. 0118 950 3350, artesanoyarns.co.uk

CORNISH ORGANIC WOOL

As Cornish as it gets, from sheep to shop, and totally organic. 01736 350905, cornishorganicwool.co.uk

ECO KNITS

A great choice of ethical yarns. ecoknits.co.uk

ETHNIC CRAFTS

Stunning yarns made from recycled fabrics and unusual fibres. 01383 223008, ethniccrafts.co.uk

GARTHENOR

Pure organic wool, including fab selection of rare-breed yarns. 01570 493347, organicpurewool.co.uk

THE NATURAL DYE STUDIO

Yarn dyed with traditional plant-based colours. thenaturaldyestudio.com

ORGANIC PURE WOOL

Take a guess... it's all good! organicpurewool.co.uk

PRICK YOUR FINGER

Shop that emphasises ethical knitting, supporting small producers. prickyourfinger.com

TRANSRURAL TRUST

Discover nettle yarn. shopattransrural.org

WILD WEAVES

Knit with bananas! 01572 757456, wildweaves.co.uk

YARNBOX

Maize-based yarn (and much more). yarnbox.co.uk