

Denim Dreams & Delightful Things



September 10, 2025

TEEA Members

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& Linda Wells, (Retired) FCH Agent Burnet County**

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Goal :

Gain new knowledge about denim and jeans.

Objectives:

- Discover the History of Denim & Jeans
- Explain how denim is made
- Clarify the environmental impact of making jeans
- Learn what makes denim great for upcycling
- Share examples and samples of upcycled jeans

history of denim fabric and jeans

Denim has been produced in this country since the late 18th century and is a twill woven fabric, most often made from cotton, and used for jeans, overalls, jackets, shirts, etc. Reference books say the origin of the word "denim" is an English version of the French word "serge de Nimes," a durable silk and wool twill fabric from the town of Nimes in France. Around the same time sailors from Genoa, Italy, wore uniforms made from cotton/linen/wool mix called "fustian" and it happened to be blue. The fabric became known as "jeans" from the sailors who wore it. It is important to note that although both denim and jean were relatively

coarse fabrics woven from a wool blend, denim consisted of one dark colored thread and one white thread. Jean, on the other hand, was woven from two threads of the same color. By the 18th century, denim and jean had arrived on the shores of the New World. While the long lasting cloth was perfect for the harsh conditions workers and settlers faced on a daily basis, it wasn't long until cotton crops prompted Americans to start manufacturing their own domestically produced



100% cotton denim and jean fabric colored blue using indigo dye. The Merriam-Webster dictionary added the word "denim" to its collection of definitions, describing it "as a coarse cotton drilling used for overalls, etc."

Denim has since become an American icon. Blue denim is truly miraculous—hard wearing, relatively cheap, comfortable, warm in winter, cool in summer and oddly neutral in color—almost everything seems to match it. Denim keeps its shape and hides the dirt until you throw it into the wash. Functional yet stylish, the more you wear it, the more stylish it becomes.

A SHORT CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF DENIM JEANS

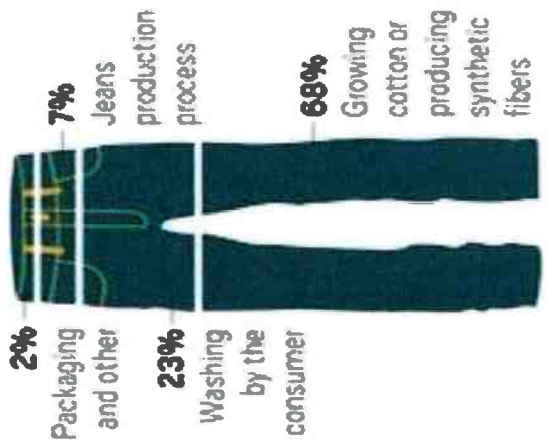
(Sources include: Levi Strauss & Co.)

- 1853** Bavarian immigrant Levi Strauss arrives in San Francisco and opens a wholesale dry goods business, selling pants made of tough canvas (later denim) to small general stores throughout the American West.
- 1872** Jacob Davis, a Reno, Nevada tailor, writes to Levi Strauss, telling him about the process he invented to rivet the pocket corners on men's pants to make them stronger.
- 1873** Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis are granted a patent on the process of riveting pants called "waist overalls." These pants have one back pocket, a cinch, suspender buttons, and a rivet in the crotch and are made of 9 oz. blue denim.
- 1890** Levi's 501 is the lot number given to designate the famous copper-riveted waist overalls.
- 1901** The pants—now just called "overalls"—now have two back pockets.
- 1910** Sometime during this decade overalls are sewn with a felted inseam.
- 1922** Belt loops are added to the overalls, but the suspender buttons are still retained.
- c1930** Blue jeans come to symbolize the swaggering American cowboy.
- 1937** The suspender buttons are removed from the overalls.
- World War II**
Changes are made to the overalls in order to conform to the rules set by the War Production Board. Rivets and back cinch are removed to save fabric and metal.
- c1950** Movie stars like James Dean started wearing "blue jeans" on camera, and denim went from a working class apparel item to a hip teenage must have.
- 1954** A zipper version of the overalls is introduced.
- 1960** The word "overalls" is replaced by the word "jeans" in advertising and on packaging.
- 1966** The first television commercial for Levi's jeans is aired.
- 1981** 501 jeans for women are introduced.
- 2003** Levi Strauss & Co. celebrates the 130th anniversary of the invention of the blue jean.
- 2007** The first publication of Indigo Junction's *Denim Redesign* book is printed.

Environmental Impact of Jeans

3,781
liters

Water used during the life cycle of a pair of Levi's jeans



11 billion kilograms

Amount of clothing that ends up in U.S. landfills each year—that's 32 kg per person

1 billion liters

Amount of water saved by Levi's since 2011 by using new garment finishing processes

15%

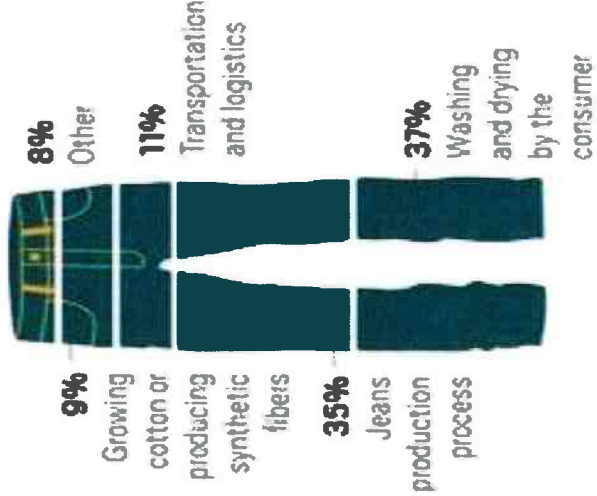
Percentage of recycled cotton that can be used in a new pair of jeans, using current technologies

3 years

Average life of a pair of Levi's jeans

33.4
kilograms

CO₂ emissions during the life cycle of a pair of Levi's jeans



Sustainable Fashion Facts

Picture this: You're rummaging through your closet, sifting through various clothes you've collected. Each piece tells a story, but have you ever thought about the broader narrative they're part of? The fashion industry, often glamorized and celebrated for its creativity, also has a less glamorous side - its environmental footprint.

From the water used in cotton farming to the waste generated by fast fashion, our wardrobe choices have far-reaching impacts. Below, we will share 20 sustainable fashion facts that may make you reconsider your next shopping spree. Welcome to a journey of understanding the true price of fashion and how we can navigate towards more sustainable choices.

What is Sustainable Fashion?

Sustainable fashion, also known as eco-fashion, is a design philosophy that aims to create a system that can be supported indefinitely in terms of environmentalism and social responsibility. It involves more than just addressing fashion textiles or products. It comprises addressing the whole system of fashion. This means dealing with interdependent social, cultural, ecological, and financial systems.

Sustainable fashion considers the full lifecycle of clothes - from the design, sourcing, and production processes to the garment's marketing, sale, and eventual disposal. It values, respects, and strives to restore the environment while positively impacting society.

Key elements of sustainable fashion include reducing waste and pollution, promoting efficient use of resources, protecting the health of workers and consumers, and supporting fair trade practices. Consumers can help drive the industry towards more ethical and eco-friendly practices by choosing sustainable fashion.

20 Fashion Facts

Sustainable fashion is more than a trend—it's a movement towards ethical and eco-friendly practices in the fashion industry. Here are 20 fashion facts that highlight the importance of this shift:

1. The apparel and footwear industries account for an estimated 8% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.
2. The value of the ethical clothing segment is forecast to be worth USD 8.3 Billion by 2025.
3. 95% of clothing that gets thrown away could be recycled or upcycled.
4. Only 15% of the textiles thrown away are recycled.
5. McKinsey estimated that 60% of apparel items are in landfills within a year after purchase.
6. Almost all textiles are recyclable.
7. The fashion industry (including apparel and footwear) accounts for 8.1% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

8. Sustainable fibers can save 20% of CO2 emissions.
9. The fashion industry is responsible for 20% of total wastewater globally.
10. As much as 20% to 35% of all primary source microplastics in the marine environment are from synthetic textiles.
11. It takes around 7,500 liters of water to make a single pair of jeans – equivalent to the amount of water the average person drinks over seven years.
12. If the fashion sector continues its current trajectory, it could use over a quarter of the world's annual carbon budget by 2050.
13. The production of polyester, the most widely used fiber in clothing, emits three times more carbon dioxide than cotton.
14. 25% of chemicals produced worldwide are used for textiles.
15. The clothing industry is the second largest polluter of clean water after agriculture.
16. Fast fashion items are often worn less than five times, kept for roughly 35 days, and produce over 400% more carbon emissions per item per year than garments worn 50 times and kept for a full year.
17. Less than 1% of the material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing at the end of its life.
18. In the EU, around 4% of waste is textile waste.
19. The average American throws away about 80 pounds of used clothing per person per year.
20. Clothing consumption produces 1.5 tons of CO2 per household per year – the equivalent of 6000 cars on the road.

These facts underline the importance and urgency of shifting towards sustainable fashion practices. By making mindful choices about what we wear, we can help mitigate these impacts and contribute to a more sustainable future.

How to Make Sustainable Fashion Choices

Making sustainable fashion choices involves shifting your mindset and adopting new habits, prioritizing the environment and social responsibility. Here are some tips on how to make more sustainable fashion choices:

Educate Yourself - The first step towards making sustainable fashion choices is to educate yourself about the fashion industry's impact on the environment and society. Understand what makes a brand or product sustainable and learn to differentiate between genuinely sustainable brands and those that engage in greenwashing.

Buy Less and Buy Better - One of the simplest ways to make your fashion choices more sustainable is to buy less. Instead of buying many cheap items that won't last, invest in fewer high-quality items that will. Look for well-made and durable clothes so you can wear them for years.

Invest in Versatile, Trans-Seasonal Clothes - Choose clothes that can be worn through all seasons and are versatile enough to suit different occasions. This reduces the need for excessive clothing and promotes a minimalist and efficient wardrobe.

Choose Clothes Made from Sustainable Materials - Look for clothes made from organic or recycled materials. Organic cotton, for example, uses less water and is grown without harmful pesticides. Recycled materials, on the other hand, help to reduce waste.

Shop Secondhand and Vintage - Shopping secondhand or vintage is a great way to reduce your fashion footprint. These clothes are already in circulation, so no new resources are needed to produce them.

Repair Before Replace - Extend the life of your clothes by repairing them instead of replacing them. Simple repairs like sewing a button or patching a hole can greatly extend a garment's lifespan.

Swap, Donate, or Recycle Your Clothes - Instead of throwing away clothes you no longer need, consider swapping them with friends, donating them to charity, or recycling them. This helps to reduce waste and give your clothes a second life.

Avoid Fast Fashion - Fast fashion is notorious for its negative environmental impact and poor labor practices. Opt for slow fashion brands that prioritize sustainability and fair labor practices.

Every small step counts when it comes to making sustainable fashion choices. By making these changes, you can help reduce your wardrobe's environmental impact and contribute to a more sustainable fashion industry.

[HTTPS://STATEOFMATTERAPPAREL.COM/BLOGS/SOM-BLOG/20-SUSTAINABLE-FASHION-FACTS#:~:TEXT=ALMOST%20ALL%20TEXTILES%20ARE%20RECYCLABLE,20%25%20OF%20TOTAL%20WASTEWATER%20GLOBALLY](https://stateofmatterapparel.com/blogs/som-blog/20-sustainable-fashion-facts#:~:text=almost%20all%20textiles%20are%20recyclable,20%25%20of%20total%20wastewater%20globally)

WHAT MAKES DENIM GREAT FOR UPCYCLING

Worn-out denim is a great fabric for upcycling for several reasons. Here are some of my favorite reasons to make upcycled denim projects:

1. **Durability and Longevity:** Due to the durability of denim fabric it's perfect for upcycling projects that can withstand some wear-and-tear and last for a long time.
2. **Versatility:** Walk the denim aisles at the thrift store and you'll see a wide variety of weights, finishes, stretches, and colors. This variety in denim fabric allows creative to upcycling denim into new clothing, fashion accessories, home decor items and more. The zippers, seams, and pockets make for great accents or individual uses.
3. **Timeless Style:** Denim never goes out of fashion! Upcycled denim items retain this classic aesthetic, making them relevant and stylish across seasons and trends. The diversity of denim available can results in many different looks and styles.
4. **Abundance:** Denim is readily available! If it's not from your closet, yard sales and thrift stores are often overflowing with jeans. Discarded and donated jeans provide ample material for upcycling projects, promoting sustainability, and reducing waste.
5. **Easy to Use:** Denim is relatively easy to work with, even for beginners. Its sturdy nature makes it forgiving when sewing or crafting, allowing for experimentation and creativity in upcycled denim projects. And with all the denim available to upcycle, it's a great fabric to experiment with and practice techniques.
6. **Customization:** Denim can be customized with fabric dye, distressing, embellishing, patchwork, and so much more.
7. **Environmental Benefits:** Upcycling denim reduces the environmental impact associated with producing new fabric. By repurposing existing denim garments, upcycling contributes to waste reduction, conserves resources, and minimizes energy consumption and pollution.
8. **Affordability:** Upcycling denim can be a cost-effective way to create fashionable items. Since denim scraps or old garments can often be acquired inexpensively or even for free, upcycling denim offers a budget-friendly alternative to purchasing new fabric making it a perfect fabric for experimenting with techniques and styles.



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1



*Goal – Gain new knowledge
about denim and jeans.*

2



History of Denim Fabric & Jeans

- Produced in U.S. since the late 18th Century
- Cotton twill woven fabric
- “Denim” from French word “serge de Nimes” from the town Nimes in France.

PBS American Experience *Riveted: the History of Jeans*

1. The History of Jeans

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmuFWu0Yrg0&list=PLmh4YIWteoGgXQKFatBUO3WFyddFS27Xu>

2. When Did Women Start Wearing Jeans?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3JHQU0Onfs&list=PLmh4YIWteoGgXQKFatBUO3WFyddFS27Xu&index=5>

3. Why jeans wear out so quickly TED ED <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amGjkXlql08>

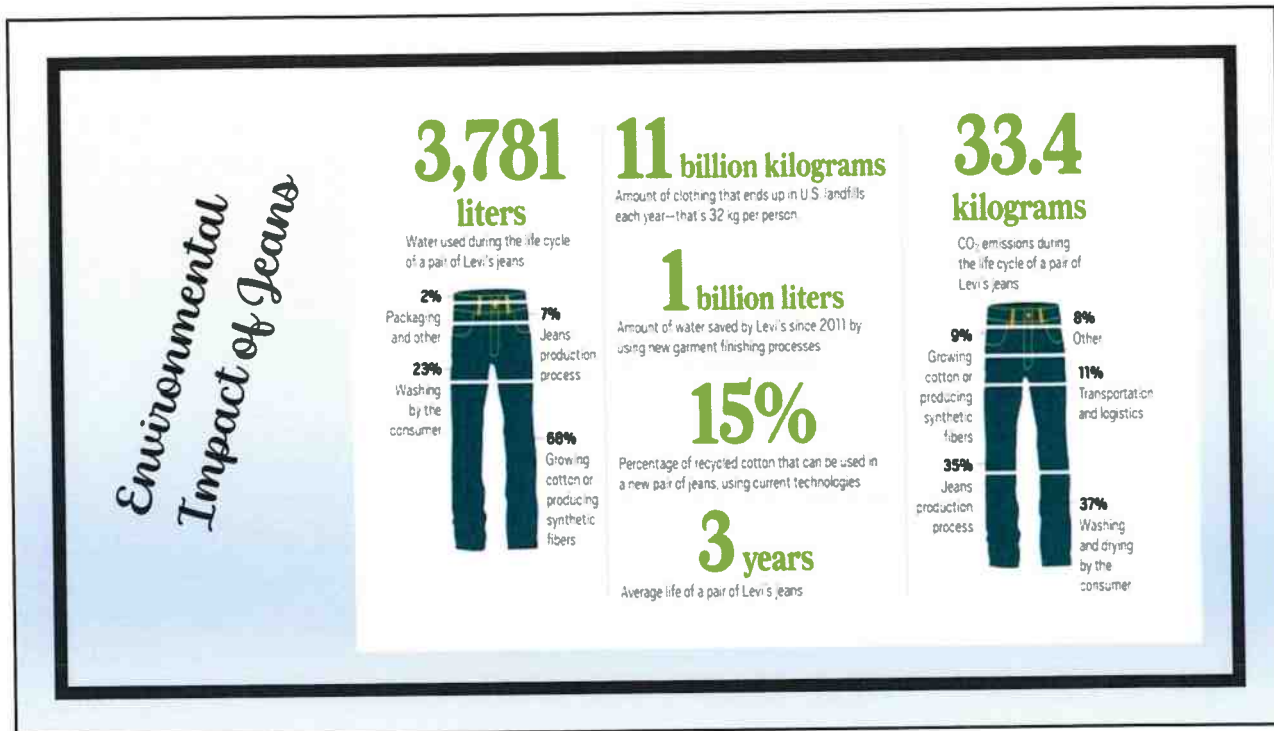
3

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4



5



What can we do?

- Wash the jeans you buy less
- Buy jeans with natural indigo
- Donate them to charity
- Upcycle – make them into something else

Discuss in handout –

What Makes Denim Great for Upcycling



6

Sustainable Fashion

Sustainable fashion considers the full lifecycle of clothes - from the design, sourcing, and production processes to the garment's marketing, sale, and eventual disposal. It values, respects, and strives to restore the environment while positively impacting society

- 95% of clothing that gets thrown away could be recycled or upcycled
- 60% of apparel items are in landfills within a year after purchase
- The fashion industry is responsible for 20% of total wastewater globally
- It takes 7,500 liters of water to make a single pair of jeans
- The production of polyester emits 3X more carbon dioxide than cotton
- Average American throws away about 80 lbs. of used clothing per person per year
- Less than 1% of the material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing

7

How to Make Sustainable Fashion Choices

Making sustainable fashion choices involves shifting your mindset and adopting new habits, prioritizing the environment and social responsibility.

Here are some tips on how to make more sustainable fashion choices:

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- Buy Less & Buy Better
- Invest in Versatile
- Sustainable Materials
- Shop Secondhand & Vintage
- Repair Before Replace
- Swap, Donate or Recycle
- Avoid Fast Fashion

8



denim redesign
by Amy Barickman

- Book - Denim Redesign
- History of denim fabric and jeans plus upcycling ideas
- Website <https://amybarickman.com> including :
DIY courses, Blog, Newsletter
Treasured Threadz

9

Denim Upcycling Ideas



10



11



12



Thank You!!
Glad you joined us today.

Acknowledgements:

PBS American Experience – *Riveted: The History of Jeans*
scratchandstitch.com JEAN-ius Lab by Cheryl Grimes
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