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The Latest Thing in Green

FIT students test environmentally friendly ways to reuse textiles

By **KAYA LATERMAN**

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Lydia Baird and Willa Tsokanis started a muslin composting program at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Mention the Fashion Institute of Technology, and green innovation isn't the first thing that springs to mind. But two FIT students are undertaking a project that they hope will make the fashion industry's use of textiles more environmentally friendly.

While the recycling of plastic, aluminum and paper is now commonplace, the recycling of organic fabric is rare, because no one has come up with an easy, environmentally friendly way to do it.

But Lydia Baird and Willa Tsokanis hope to change that. Students in FIT's textile development and marketing program, they found themselves asking why the school routinely tossed out reams of muslin, a cheap strain of cotton used throughout the industry to test designs, once students were finished with it.

While biodegradable, it takes longer to break down when mixed with other landfill refuse.

“I basically got annoyed with all the waste that was around me at school,” said Ms. Baird. “I learned in class that cotton was biodegradable, so the big question was: Why is no one doing anything about all of the muslin scraps?”



After a month, muslin scraps have started to decay and turn brown. PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Ms. Baird learned about composting at a volunteer program on Governors Island, then conducted small-scale tests at home before taking her idea to FIT’s administration. She secured quick approval from the school, which has adopted many sustainability programs over the years, like reducing carbon emissions by adding green roofs to various campus buildings.

After obtaining grants and other funds from FIT and taking the idea to the Clinton Global Initiative University conference, the two students purchased a 100-gallon compost tumbler that now sits in the courtyard of the Marvin Feldman Center, FIT’s oldest structure.

Asking students to donate unused muslin and gathering classroom scraps at semester’s end, the two collected about 250 pounds of muslin, which has helped fill the composter twice so far. They chop it up and mix it with organic food matter, including dining-hall leftovers and coffee grinds from the campus Starbucks.

We’re out here every day, turning the machine,” which involves turning a large crank that’s on the side of the tumbler, adding needed oxygen to the heap of muslin and food scraps. Ms. Baird said, estimating that it takes about four



Sunflower, indigo, marigold and other plants used to produce dye are grown on FIT's rooftop garden. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

months for muslin to turn into compost.

The process doesn't end there. The resulting organic material is headed for the building's rooftop garden, where plants are cultivated to make natural dyes. Built last year, it is small and has only a handful of plants, including sunflowers, indigo, lavender and marigolds. But the garden has already produced small volumes of dye, and large-scale tests will start this fall.

"We plan to grind the plants into powdered-dye form and then look at the strength of dye and colorfastness on various fabrics," said associate professor Ajoy Sarkar. "And this will be done in the school's lab, all in the same building."



Marigolds drying for use as dye. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The project will also include running other experiments, trying to determine, for example, how muslin compost affects a plant's composition and thus its

resulting dye, and whether silk or wool might also be composted.

“Testing out the soil, its chemical composition, and impact on dye may be the first big step, but I feel like if we can keep the momentum going, muslin composting can have a big impact on the textile and fashion industries around the world,” said Ms. Baird, who envisions huge, organic textile-composting machines in major clothing factories and design studios.

Ms. Baird and Ms. Tsokanis must work quickly, however, as they’re set to graduate from FIT next year. They plan to educate incoming students on their project and hopefully pass the torch to them.

“The textile industry is still quite wasteful, and it will take a collective solution from all of us,” Ms. Tsokanis said. “No one likes to clean up a giant mess after making something. But wouldn’t it be great if organic fabric can be cleaned up and be reused responsibly, all in one place?”

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