

INSPIRING READS

Sustainable sewing

It's time to make a positive change: **Becca Parker** interviews four experts in eco quilting practices to uncover some creative and easy ways that we can all become more conscious crafters

It's no secret that textile waste is one of the heaviest burdens facing our world right now. In fact, according to sustainability NGO WRAP, an estimated £140m worth of clothing is sent to UK landfill each year. That's mind-blowing. And it's a cause for concern across the pond, too. As San Francisco-based stitcher Amari Thomsen (@nextgenquilting) explains: "Of the 17 million tons of textiles generated in the U.S.

annually, the Environmental Protection Agency reports that only 14.7% are recycled – resulting in over 11.3 million tons of textile waste in landfills." What does that mean on a smaller scale? "Every year the average American generates around 70 pounds of waste from textiles," Amari continues, "including things like clothing, linens and towels. This stuff doesn't just go away. It often takes hundreds of years for these products to decompose and can

for future generations. As ardent fabric lovers with the skills to respond creatively, what can we be doing to ensure we're helping push back the tide and not add to it? We've spoken with some of the most resourceful eco quilters out there to discover exactly that.

Not buying new
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generate harmful greenhouse gas emissions along the way." Needless to say, it's a problem right now, and

before buying new. The most sustainable fabric is what's already in your stash. But why stop there? Look beyond the quilting cottons, and any textile is fair game. Amari began quilting during the pandemic. In the face of shop closures, she had no choice but to be imaginative and she's stuck with it. "I repurpose old clothes from my closet for fabric, turn old sheets and blankets into batting," she reveals, "and I collect scraps from quilting friends to give them a second life." This will be music to your ears if you're keen to both care for the planet and stay mindful of budget and storage considerations. British quilter Chris English (@afullenglish) initially sought out second-hand

fabrics for their originality and affordability, but they soon took on new meaning. "I watched the Stacey Dooley documentary about fast fashion," he tells us. "It shocked me how many resources it took to produce cotton for fashion and I figured the same must apply to quilting cotton. I realised I didn't need to buy brand new fabric for every quilt. Check your wardrobe. If you've got an old top, shirt or skirt that you know you won't wear again, then it might as well go into a quilt." The second-hand-first approach leads to fantastic creativity. Amari's favourite sustainable project is an amazing example of this. "I turned

six chambray shirts, two bedsheets and a couple of fleece blankets into a beautiful quilt masterpiece," she told us, "And I loved every second of the process. It's so satisfying to see these old textiles – which were ultimately bound for the trash – take on a second life in a new form." There's one project that stands out for hand-stitcher Maday Delgado (@sustainabletextiledesign) too. Almost five years in the making, it's called Lost and Reclaimed. "I'm still working on it. It contains old jeans from my family and myself, and silk dresses I found at a vintage shop around the time a loved one was going through a hard time.



Above: Arounna's patchwork collage is made using natural dyed fabrics

Above right: Amari made this quilted apron using scraps from her stash

Far right: Amari's quilt was made from pre-loved shirts

Below: Maday loves to quilt with second-hand fabrics





Top left to right: Feel inspired by Arounna and Maday's scrappy patchwork creations

Right: Maday in front of her work

Bottom: Amari at her trusty sewing machine



It also has swatches of traditional Mexican shirts and fabric scraps that local friends have donated." It's even stitched with threads from a special pair of jeans she splashed out on years ago. "Understanding how things are made and the human investment of making them can be an eye-opening experience. Maybe it teaches us that there is both a human and environmental cost to overproduction and overconsumption." In this case, less really can mean more.

Every scrap counts

Once those sustainable fabrics are ready to go, there's something else to bear in mind: leaving no offcuts behind. Scraps, remnants and selvages still have life in them, if we choose to recognise it. Maday has known this for a long time. "I grew up in Cuba," she shares, "where resourcefulness and 'making do' is a crucial part of everyday life, even today. Nothing is wasted and everything has potential."

Quilters are hard-wired to make the most of every inch of fabric. As maker, teacher and author Arounna

Khounnoraj (@bookhou) puts it, "Quilters have already incorporated practices that are positive steps, such as reducing waste by saving and reusing remnants, and utilizing patterns where small remnants can be used. There's a long history of quilting that turns discarded materials and even garments into amazing works of creativity." The Gee's Bend quilts are a prime example of this for Chris. "They've been made using whatever fabric was available and because of this, their uniqueness shines through," he enthuses. "The women that made these quilts didn't have access to all of the fabric we do now, yet still produced incredibly beautiful quilts."

Limitations can open up your creativity. "I have always tried to find ways to use up all my remnants and turn them into useful objects," Arounna says. "This way of working has really sparked my creativity, where putting small pieces together is like a puzzle. I enjoy the challenge when the design process becomes an exercise in problem solving, and it often encourages me to go in

Above: Amari's double-sided quilts use up twice the number of scraps!

Right: Maday printed this linen with leaves collected on a walk

Below: Arounna with her work



directions that I would not have necessarily pursued otherwise." For Maday, there's a sense of connection that comes with embracing scraps. "Patching things together makes sense to me," she volunteers. "I love mixing scraps; old jeans that are falling apart, vintage handkerchiefs or leftover materials other creatives have given to me. The energy comes from all of the places those old fabrics have been and the memories they have collected in their travels."

Make do and mend

So now we're all sold on using second-hand textiles, how about flipping the script and using your sewing skills to preserve the life of textiles before they become scraps? That's right, mending. With the cottagecore aesthetic at an all-time high and top indie fashion brands releasing covetable patchwork coats and the like, there's actually never been a better time to wear your patchwork heart on your sleeve.

It's a topic Arounna is passionate about. "In the past, textiles have always incorporated reuse and

TOP TIPS TO TRY

Our experts shared a few valuable hacks you'll want to keep in mind when you're considering your next project. "Embrace frankenbatting – a large piece of batting made from multiple smaller pieces," suggests Amari. "Use flannel sheets and fleece blankets for batting or quilt backs." Batting scraps, as well as fabric scraps, are something you can call on your community for. Check in with quilt friends, both in person and online, and see what other materials you could swap, share or give. Think local too. Second-hand and vintage stores in your neighbourhood could have just what you need. Maday reminds us to think beyond the materials too. "Sometimes we leave the sewing machine or iron plugged in all day even if we are not sewing. Make sure to unplug them when you are not in the sewing room actively working on your projects."



MEET THE EXPERTS



AMRARI THOMSEN

Amari started quilting during the Covid-19 pandemic, as a way to pass the time and pick up a new crafty skill during quarantine – though she’s been sewing since she was a teen! Her Instagram features tonnes of tips for sustainable and budget-friendly sewing, as well as minimalist, scrappy quilting practices.

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CHRIS ENGLISH

Having studied textile design at university, Chris has had an interest in creative pursuits and design for his whole life – though his self-proclaimed creative passion was certainly found in quilting. He loves to make beautifully textured heirloom quilts made from second-hand fabrics, giving old clothes and scraps a new lease of life.

[@afullenglish](#)
[chrisenglishquilts.com](#)



AROUNNA KHOUNNORAJ

Sewist and author Arounna is a proponent of slow design and hand stitching. Her most recent book, *Visible Mending*, is a love letter to the art of darning well-loved items of clothes both functionally as well as artistically. Her hand-sewn quilts and textiles are made with a focus on natural, handmade materials and can be found at her studio, Bookhou, in-store in Toronto and online.

[@bookhou](#)
[bookhou.com](#)



MADAY DELGADO

Cuban artist, teacher and hand-stitching practitioner Maday is an advocate for the slow stitching movement, highlighting its benefits for both personal wellness and the environment.

Consciousness about resource wastage and re-using that which we already have is at the heart of her work, with her quilts often utilising fabric scraps and second-hand textiles. Her goal is to unify her students through a shared love of craft and promote sustainable sewing practises.

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repair into the life span of objects, and mending can often be a really artful addition to a garment.” And, of course, there’s the personal element. “There is a real connection between making a hole in your garment through your daily activity and the process of mending it,” she shares. “Something as simple as a hole in a pair of jeans or an elbow of a sweater means I am connecting directly to the wearer. It allows you to express your activity and the garment’s history at once.”

In a society of overconsumption that’s costing the earth, it’s time we called into question the glorification of an ever-growing fabric stash and always opting for new. There is

already enough. We might just need to get creative and look deeper into our closets and communities to find it. See the value in every scrap. You’ll be free from the paralysis of choice, as Chris puts it, and there’s such joy in reinvention. It binds us into the great tradition of quilters who have gone before, working resourcefully and creating true beauty with limited means. “If I have learned anything from the sewing community,” says Maday, “It’s that we can make magic out of nothing.”



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