

Hanging by a thread

Organic cotton is popular, but it's a thirsty crop. Adam Readfearn looks at the cost of production

WHEN it comes to getting comfortable garments from natural fibres, cotton has been king for a long time.

Australia exports more than \$1 billion worth of cotton every year and it is a third of the producers are based in Queensland.

As an exporter and innovator, the state ranks as one of the world leaders, but actual production levels are being fed by China and the US.

Despite an emerging trend for clothes made from organic cotton, there is only one certified organic cotton farm in the country, located in the South Coast.

Old Coast business Organic Cotton Advantage sources its cotton from the region, but has ironically been forced to import organic cotton yarn because of shortage of supply here.

"We are almost sold out and have had to import containers of organic yarn from Turkey and India. It's pretty bloody annoying," says co-founder Nick Barclay.

"We have the money and we want to give it to an Aussie family."

Organic Cotton Advantage produces organic T-shirts and has a division selling finished organic cotton fabric that lists leading Australian brand Ksubi among its clients.

Barclay, who started the business 10 years ago with friend Andrew Ginn, gained his passion for organics while working in US for clothing firm Gonia, which uses only organic cotton in its products.

Barclay explains that certified organic cotton does not use genetically modified seed or synthetic fertilisers. He adds that the organic farm he buys seed from does not use irrigation in waterways.

According to peak industry body Cotton Australia, some 90 per cent of the country's cotton crop comes from "genetic varieties" or are genetically modified.

Cotton Australia CEO Adam Kay says Australia is leading the world in organic cotton production, in terms of saving down water use, increasing yield and reducing pesticide use by 90 per cent.

Barclay says while it takes about 830



THE Perfect Dress, (\$109.95, from Bamboo Body, made from bamboo fibres.

Growing market for green

» From P41

One of the challenges in developing the range was the price of the yarn sourced from overseas which, says Gage, came at a premium.

Included in the range are six dresses, priced from \$49.95 to \$99.95.

As part of Vaughan's fashion course at QUT, students take part in a "green is the new black" assignment where they work with organic and eco-friendly fabrics and learn about production practices.

Vaughan says about a quarter of her students this year have chosen to continue to work entirely with organic fabrics. In an attempt to come up with a more environmentally friendly product, new Brisbane label Bamboo Body is using cloth made from bamboo fibres.

Amanda Naess, 29, from the Brisbane suburb of Ascot, and sister Elouise Danby, 31, from Sydney, are behind the label. Naess, who runs maternity wear boutique Glow Mama in Clayfield, on Brisbane's northside, says the "throw-away nature of fashion" has always troubled her ethical ideals.

"We are trying to address the issue of over-consumption by making simple pieces which you can mix and match and that won't lose their appeal over time," she says. "The fashion industry relies on people buying and consuming and then throwing things out. It's not in their best interest to do anything about it because it's damaging their profitability."

Naess has sourced the bamboo cloth from China, where the garments are also made, and she says they have travelled there to see the processes and factories.

She says they did consider making the garments in Australia, but pattern makers and manufacturers were reluctant to engage with a new company.

Sunshine Coast ethical designer Katie Gannon, creator of the Mother Maria label that uses recycled fabric, came up against similar problems. After deciding to produce on a larger scale, she advertised for sewers but in three months received just one job application. Now the garments are made in Indonesia.

Gannon started about eight years ago producing dresses and garments from recycled fabrics bought from op shops and garage sales.

She ensures her garments are made in ethical conditions, but the problems of having to produce on a large scale mean her clothes now include new, non-organic fabric.

"You have so many chain stores with fast fashion and new products coming in every week," she says.

"Apart from encouraging people to consume, it's environmentally detrimental because there's masses of clothing ending up in landfill."

litres of water to produce enough cotton to make an average T-shirt, that figure is half that of most other places in the world.

"Yes, there is interest in organic cotton, but it's a tiny amount of the global cotton trade. It comes down to economics," Kay says.

He says too often consumers will say they want organic products but do not want to pay extra for it.

"We are saying that as an industry,

we don't see organic as being sustainable," Kay says.

He reveals that two Japanese clothing retailers are now marketing their clothes, made from Australian cotton, under an eco-friendly label.

Jo Immig, National Toxics Network co-ordinator, questions the chemical reduction claims made by Cotton Australia, saying she has been unable to obtain independent verification.

Immig says while genetically

engineered cotton seed has reduced chemical use, there are concerns that some weeds and insects are now developing a resistance to the plant's in-built defences.

"No matter how you look at it — whether it's organic or not — cotton is a very thirsty crop," she says.

"That's why hemp and bamboo are coming in because they use less water. Growing a water-thirsty crop like cotton in Australia is absurd."