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Good clothes: waste not, want not

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People who spend their spare time shopping should find another hobby, textiles expert India Flint says.

Flint said shopping as a form of recreation was "terribly dull" and "terrifying".

Instead, she advocates reducing, reusing, repurposing and recycling the clothes in our wardrobes. And she puts her words into action - her own wardrobe is tiny.

"Presently I have about two apron dresses, which I wear a lot, four pairs of trousers and half a dozen long-sleeve T-shirts," she said.

Flint made everything in it, apart from her knickers.

She adores making shapes with her sewing machine, reworking garments from op-shop finds and cooking up her own clothing dye from leaves.

Her passion isn't the sole motivation for her thriftiness.

Flint, who is based in South Australia, said people's drive for the latest fashion was rapidly destroying the planet.

Until about 30 years ago, Australia had a fabulous textiles industry, she said.

"But the plug got pulled, and it's been flooded with really rubbishy Chinese imports that mostly end up at the tip," Flint said.

"Meanwhile oil, a precious commodity, is being wasted taking these things back and forth.

"Large (fashion and clothing) corporations are looking for ways to make money, so they create a need, where this isn't one, I don't think."

Flint said that to fight this created need and to help save the planet, people should buy fewer clothes, be aware of where and how their clothes were made, and make the clothes they own last longer.

The look of the piece was often a good-enough indicator of the quality and how it was made.

"You can have a pretty good idea that if it doesn't cost very much, that it's produced in the nastiest and cheapest possible way," she said.

Buying natural fabrics and ethical clothing often meant sourcing from a few dedicated suppliers.

Flint gave the examples of Sydney's Hemp Gallery, whose owners go to Yugoslavia and Hungary to check out where the hemp is grown and what's poured on it, and Melbourne's Beautiful Silks, whose founder Marion Gorr travels to factories in China to check the conditions where her silks are produced.

"And we have the miracle of the internet," she said.

"Google organic clothing supplies and a lot will be revealed."

As a bonus for the consumer, many organic clothing suppliers also use natural clothing dyes, steering clear of the chemical polymers used to colour the vast majority of clothes in shops.

"Anything with a bright colour is unnaturally dyed, and that all involves chemistry - pretty dangerous chemistry," Flint said.

"Synthetic dyes are giving the people in the dye houses that make them cancer as much as potentially coming off on your own skin."

Never shy of a home-made solution, Flint said it was easy to dye clothes naturally in people's own kitchens - using Australia's very own eucalyptus leaves.

To dye cloth this way, Flint said to fill a pot with the eucalyptus leaves, add water to within a handsbreadth of the rim, heat to boiling point and simmer for one hour. Then take out the leaves, add the fabric and heat for a while longer before allowing to cool.

Depending on the leaves, this method can be used to create a wide spectrum of colours from green, gold and orange to tan, chocolate and red.

Flint doesn't just colour her own clothes; she also sews them.

"I make a lot of my clothes from garments I've sourced from a thrift store where you find hideously cut garments but with perfectly good fabric that you can reuse - and I quite like that challenge," she said.

But this idea won't suit everybody. Not everyone is nimble-fingered on the sewing machine, let alone confident in cutting patterns or able to free up the time to do so.

For people in this category - perhaps most of us - Flint would nudge people encouragingly towards a local dressmaker, a profession that she believes is on the rise again.

"With your local dressmaker you're guaranteed to have something that is the fabric of your choice, is going to fit you properly and you'll have the resources to mend it if you need to because you'll have the offcuts," she said.

Once people have their prized garment, they should look after it, Flint said.

She advises simple airing on a regular basis; handwashing or using a gentle cycle on the washing machine; drying in the shade, not in a tumble drier; and avoiding evil fabric conditioners.

"Fabric conditioners coat your fabric with a kind of polymer and it takes about 12 washes to get rid of that stuff," she said.

To soften clothes naturally, Flint recommends adding a teaspoon of vinegar or lemon juice to the rinse water. "(You just need) the acidity that knocks back the alkalinity in the detergent and in the water," she said.

While Flint counsels ethical choices and mindfulness "no matter what you do", she admits that even she is tempted to stray by something new, shiny and beautiful once in a while.

"I occasionally lust after a good pair of boots, myself," she said.

INDIA FLINT'S TIPS TO MAKE YOUR CLOTHES LAST LONGER:

- 1. Mend clothes before washing so that holes and rips don't grow.**
- 2. Wear old clothes at home.**
- 3. Air clothes before storing, either indoors or outside in the shade.**
- 4. Hang clothes while they are still warm (they'll be less likely to crease).**
- 5. Remove stains while they are fresh.**
- 6. Fix that loose button before it wanders off into the world.**

7. Rotate clothes and shoes; they'll wear better.

8. Don't let clothes become really filthy; engrained dirt is difficult to remove.

9. Save energy when washing by soaking clothes (unless the colour is likely to run).

10. Sponge clean coats and jackets with a damp lint-free cloth before putting away.

• India Flint is the author of *Second Skin: Choosing and caring for textiles and clothing*.

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