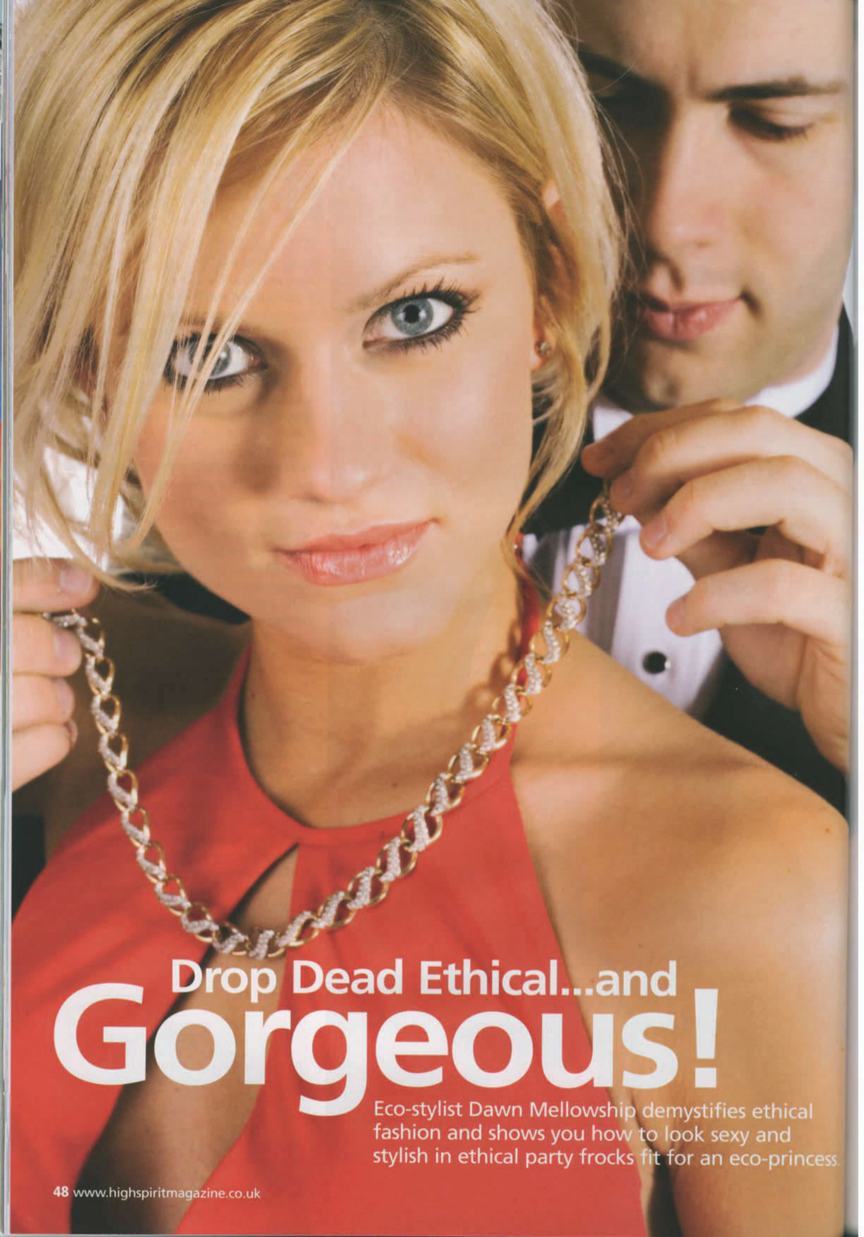

Drop Dead Ethical...and Gorgeous!

Eco-stylist Dawn Mellowship demystifies ethical fashion and shows you how to look sexy and stylish in ethical party frocks fit for an eco-princess.

Ethical fashion used to be the preserve of tree-hugging hippies and eco-warriors. With a dearth of stylish clothing available, it was firmly seated outside the realms of haute couture or even high-street fashion, but the tide appears to be turning towards a fusion of eco-aware and effortless style.

Pioneers of the field such as veteran ethical designer Katherine Hamnett, Ali Hewson and Bono, Safia Minney of People Tree and Peter Ingwerson of Noir have transformed ethical fashion into something wearable, chic and bang on trend.

If you ever needed any confirmation that ethical fashion is on the up, cast your eyes towards London Fashion Week, where a section entitled Esthetica at the Natural History Museum, was entirely devoted to ethical fashion labels. The Clothes Show Live in December is also going to be awash with green fashion, courtesy of its Fashion Conscience area, and high-street chains such as Dorothy Perkins, GAP, Marks & Spencers and New Look are also hopping on the ethical fashion bandwagon, producing their own fair trade or organic collections. Even Topshop's flagship store in Oxford Street has a concession devoted to ethical label People Tree. Purchasing ethical garments sends out a signal to all retailers that consumers are no longer going to tolerate workers in third world countries being subject to unfair and unsafe working conditions or deleterious practices that spoil our planet.

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However, whilst it is fabulous that ethically conscious fashion appears to be taking root, one obstacle seems to be the public's understanding of what ethical fashion ultimately amounts to. Who can blame us when there is no umbrella organisation offering set enforceable standards for the ethical production of all clothing? Instead there are a variety of organisations offering different types of certification and a plethora of companies making ethical claims about their products, some valid and others more questionable.

To break it down for those who are not familiar with this fashion genre, it commonly refers to one or a mixture of the following, although it can sometimes refer to other social or environmental practices as well:

ALTERNATIVE FIBRES

Conventional cotton farming uses 25% of the world's chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Additionally, many clothes are made from man-made oil based fibres. Brands that concentrate on using alternative fibres such as hemp, bamboo and flax help to prevent the reliance on cotton by utilising more sustainable and eco-friendly fabrics.

AZO FREE

This refers to garments that have not been dyed with a large class of synthetic colours referred to as azo dyes, which can remain persistent in the environment. Some azo dyes have been linked with cancer and other health conditions, and a number of them have been banned.

FAIR TRADE

This can refer to Fair Trade certified goods (such as the Fair Trade Organisation mark given by the International Fair Trade Association), where disadvantaged producers in the third world are given fair working conditions and aided in establishing security and self-sufficiency. Or, it can refer to the Fair Trade movement as a whole, describing certified and uncertified products.

FAIR TRADE

This is a broader term used to describe the above or other issues of trade justice, such as the rights of workers.

FAIRTRADE

This term is used to describe the certification and labelling system controlled by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO) intended to enable consumers to identify products that have been produced under set labour and environmental standards. To display a Fairtrade Certification Mark a product must meet international Fairtrade Standards. In the UK The Fairtrade Foundation licenses the FAIRTRADE mark to products which meet FLO standards.

LOCALLY SOURCED

Products that are shipped around the globe lead to more carbon emissions polluting the planet. Locally sourced items are manufactured in the UK or your country of residence and support local workers.

ORGANIC

This means that the fabric used to create a fashion item has been produced without the use of chemical pesticides and other harmful chemicals, ensuring that workers are not exposed to agrochemicals. A garment labelled as organic may be certified with a body such as the Soil Association, or Ecocert, or uncertified.

RECYCLED

Recycled fashion pieces are constructed from old or discarded materials and clothing, to avoid the unnecessary waste of a fast fashion industry and culture.

SWEATSHOP-FREE

Clothing that is characterised as sweatshop free should not have been made in manufacturing facilities in developing countries where employees work long hours, for poor wages, under poor conditions.

VEGAN

This refers to garments that are free of any animal products or by-products (including leather, wool, angora, cashmere, alpaca etc) and therefore have not contributed to animal cruelty and suffering in their production.

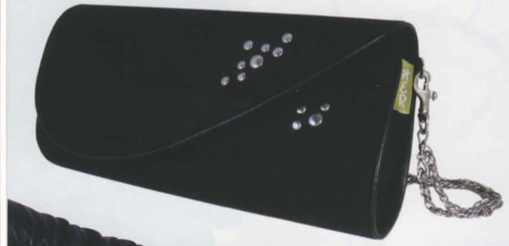
VINTAGE

This term generally refers to an item of another era, often high quality, collectible and desirable brands and labels, again avoiding consumer waste.

At first blush it may seem like an absolute minefield but shopping ethically doesn't have to be a bugbear, if you're not afraid to chat to a brand about their modes of practice, buy recycled and vintage fashions, along with clothing made from 'alternative fibres,' and look for recognised labels such as those of the International Fair Trade Association (IFAT), Fairtrade Foundation, Soil Association and Ecocert.

To give you a kick-start for the Christmas party season here are four on trend outfits, each centred around one fabulous frock. It's time to stock up your wardrobe with some ethical outfits and learn to enjoy having a fashion conscience that simultaneously screams, "Ethical and in vogue!"

Dawn Mellowship is the UK's first online eco-stylist and her websites can be found at www.ecostylist.co.uk www.dawnmellowship.com.

SHOW-STOPPING SOPHISTICATION

Vintage Gianni Versace satin halter gown, $,1750, Thefrock.com
Sui Generis, Beyond Skin Frankie stiletto, in black, vegan, locally sourced, £287, Suigeneriscollection.co.uk.
Vintage 1950s Opera Length Gloves, cotton with rhinestones, $65, Poshgirlvintage.com
Her Design, Helen E Riegle Mist bag, certified wool flannel with vegan leather trim and recycled PET, £59.50, Her-design.com.
Brilliant Earth 18K White Gold Pave Diamond Necklace, made with Conflict Free Diamonds, $1,500, Brilliantearth.com.