

Cotton Tale

Not all cotton fabrics are created equal. From seersucker to sateen, **11 options to keep you cool this summer.**

COTTON IS THE UNSUNG HERO of the fabric world. It's not embellished, like silk; no special goats' bellies have to be shaved to get it; and nobody is likely to paw your cable-knit cardigan and say, "Oooh, is that cotton?" But whatever the material lacks in glamour, it more than makes up for in versatility. Thanks to different fiber types and weaves, it can be your go-to fabric for almost every occasion—oxford cloth for work, denim for the weekend, and sateen for evenings. On the following pages, you'll find a roundup of the best warm-weather cottons, so you'll know which types will keep you coolest, last the longest, or feel the softest. Granted, strangers may not run up to you and touch your clothes, but who really wants that, anyway?

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“You wouldn't know Egyptian cotton if Pharaoh himself gave it to you.”

Samuel L. Jackson
as John Shaft in *Shaft*

Natural Selections

Cotton is just cotton, right? Well, not exactly. The look and feel of cotton garments vary depending on where the plants used to make them are grown and how the fabric is woven. Here, the 11 most summer-friendly cottons and fabrics, plus *Real Simple's* picks to round out the season's wardrobe.

Jersey

A knit fabric, used primarily in T-shirts and sheets, jersey is known for its elasticity, drape, and affordability.



American Apparel Short-Sleeve Tee Shirt, \$15
This slim-fit tee is a summer staple you can afford to stockpile—and you have more than 30 colors to choose from.
TO BUY: www.americanapparelstore.com.

Oxford

A staple of the nine-to-five set, this soft shirting fabric is often embellished with stripes or woven effects.



Brooks Brothers Sleeveless Shirt, \$65
Great for everyday use, this top can be machine washed and tumble dried, and it requires no ironing to keep it wrinkle-free.
TO BUY: www.brooksbrothers.com.

Cotton Is...

...A PART OF HISTORY
The earliest cotton remnants are estimated to be about 5,000 years old. The material clothed the pre-Incans and outfitted American natives, which tricked Columbus into thinking he had reached India (at the time, cotton was known to grow only in Asia).

...REVOLUTIONARY
It sparked England's Industrial Revolution, factored heavily into the start of the American Civil War, and established the United States as an early global powerhouse.

...AFFORDABLE AND ABUNDANT
"Cotton is popular because it's inexpensive," says Stephen Yafa, the author of *Cotton: The Biography of a Revolutionary Fiber* (Penguin, \$15). "Approximately 40 billion pounds a year is grown in about 80 countries worldwide."

...COOLING
Cotton wicks moisture from the body, transferring it away from the skin.

...EASY TO CLEAN
You can launder most cotton garments at home. (See Wash and Wear, page 84, for tips.)

Pima

Distinguished by its sheerness and strength, pima is an extra-long cotton grown mostly in the Southwest and used for sheets and casual shirts.



Three Dots Sleeveless Tee Shirt, \$68
Keep your cool in this ultra-lightweight V-necked tank. Comes in 16 colors.
TO BUY: 323-782-0139 for store locations.

Egyptian

Call it the cashmere of cotton. Strong yet fine, this Egyptian-grown fiber is used to create high-end dress shirts and sheets.



Thomas Pink Rosa Stripe Button-Down, \$140
A white collar and cuffs add to the crispness of this striped shirt, which can be worn to work or on the weekend.
TO BUY: 212-838-1928.

Seersucker

Synonymous with summer suiting, seersucker is a lightweight fabric characterized by alternating puckered and smooth sections, which hide wrinkles.



Dockers Cropped Jacket, \$58

A sporty cropped cut and a nontraditional color palette distinguish this fully lined jacket. Comes in four color combinations.

TO BUY: www.dockers.com.

Sea Island

Once grown in Sea Island, Georgia, this expensive, silky fiber—used for shirts, sweaters, and towels—is now harvested in the West Indies (and is in short supply).



John Smedley

Elsbeth Cardigan, \$195

This cardigan is part of a large Sea Island collection made by a company that has specialized in the cotton for more than 220 years. Available in four colors.

TO BUY: Jane, 212-772-7710.

Denim

Although it's a modern favorite, this sturdy twill fabric, most often woven with indigo blue and gray or white yarns, has been in use since the late 18th century.



Eddie Bauer Novelty

Denim Trousers, \$68

Thanks to trouser styling and a dark wash, these tab-front jeans are especially easy to dress up.

TO BUY: www.eddiebauer.com.

Twill

Used for chinos and more, twill is a woven fabric that features distinctive diagonal lines on its face and a bit of stretch, making it ideal for form-fitting garments.



Gap Twill Pants, \$42.50

These khakis flatter with a rise that's not too low and a leg cut that is slightly flared. Also available in camel, stone, white, and leek green.

TO BUY: www.gap.com.

Sateen

Sateen's strength has made it the perfect fabric for military clothing, including camouflage, but its smooth satin finish gives it a dressy allure.



J.Crew Molly Dress, \$395
Formal without being fussy, this empire-waisted dress is perfect for dinners out and special occasions. Also in ivory, navy, and brown.
TO BUY: 800-562-0258.

Terry Cloth

A staple for towels, robes, and beachwear, terry cloth is a woven or knitted material with moisture-absorbing loop piles covering one or both sides.



Restoration Hardware Paradigm Bath Robe, \$79
Who hasn't thought of swiping the robe from a four-star hotel? Instead, claim this one for yourself. Monogramming available for \$6.
TO BUY: www.restorationhardware.com.

Voile

This lightweight, plain-weave fabric has a sheer look and a slightly crisp feel. Commonly used for women's blouses, dresses, and curtains.



Matta NY Anika Skirt, \$225
This appliquéd skirt features a full and flattering cut, with a wide, tummy-hiding waistband. Also in aqua, lime, white, and black.
TO BUY: 212-343-9399.

Wash and Wear

Five tips for keeping washable cotton pieces clean and pristine.

- 1. Inspect clothing under a bright light when you take it off.** "The light helps reveal subtle stains, like collar soil," says Steve Boorstein, a clothing-care expert based in Bethesda, Maryland. Dirt causes friction, which in turn causes thinning and holes.
- 2. Pretreat stains on underarms, collars, and cuffs if you're not going to wash the garment within 24 hours.**
- 3. When choosing the water temperature for machine washing, follow the directions on the clothing labels.** This will maximize cleaning and minimize fading.
- 4. Use quality detergents—ones that are low-residue and contain no dyes or phosphates.** "High-quality soap usually rinses out completely," says Boorstein, so the garment won't feel scratchy.
- 5. Soak the garment in a fabric- and color-safe bleach every three to five washings.** This will combat armpit stains and collar rings.
Note: Read the care label before washing delicate knits that may snag, high-sheen sateen garments, or those made of pricey Egyptian or Sea Island cotton. A trip to the dry cleaner may be necessary.