

What to do with a worn-out



BY KEVIN MA
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I got a sock with a hole in it. Several, actually, along with some distressed pants, unwanted shirts, and worn-out shoes.

The shirts I can donate, but the socks look like trash. St. Albert's Waste Wise app says I should throw them out, but that would waste usable fabric and contribute to climate change. So the socks sit there in a pile, waiting for a purpose.

This year for Waste Reduction Week (Oct. 17-23), I decided to find out what to do with my worn-out clothes. Turns out there is a heck of a lot you can do with an old sock.

Trash fashion

If I threw out my socks, I would be tossing them atop the growing mountain of textile waste the world cranks out every day. About 87 per cent of the fibres that go into clothing end up buried or incinerated, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates — that's a dump-truck's worth of clothing every second.

This is a consequence of the fast-fashion industry, said Rachel McQueen, a human ecology professor at the University of Alberta who studies textile waste. Cheap clothes made from cheap fabrics with cheap labour encourage people to buy more and toss more, spurred on by the release of new lines and collections every week.

"It's become a wasteful industry," McQueen said, one which encourages people to see clothes as disposable.

Fast fashion has serious environmental consequences. The textiles industry devours 98 million tonnes of non-renewable resources a year, including 342 million barrels of oil for plastics and 200,000 tonnes of pesticides for cotton, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates. Every tonne of textiles produced creates 17 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions; in 2015, textile produc-



PHOTOS BY KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette

A worker prepares donated clothes for sale at the Goodwill Impact Centre in Edmonton Oct. 7. These clothes will be offered for sale by the pound for about 25 minutes before being shipped to other manufacturers.

tion cranked out more carbon than all international flights and ocean shipping combined.

Why not recycle?

Less than one per cent of the material used to make clothes get recycled into new clothing, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates.

"Recycling textiles is really challenging," McQueen explained, as textiles involve so many different materials.

My worn out sock is made from polyester, cotton, and Spandex, for example, so I would have to separate each thread into those components by colour to

recycle it. Even if I did that, McQueen said I would still have to figure out the kind of plastic used in the polyester, the fibre content of each thread, and the dyes applied to each.

There are chemical techniques which can achieve this level of sorting, but they have yet to be used at scale, McQueen said. Many clothes contain recycled material, but that material was typically from bottles or other trash, not fabric — Econyl, made from recycled nylon, was one of the few exceptions. Most of today's textile "recycling" involved shredding material for use in new products such as insulation, not clothing.



Doug Roxburgh inspects bales of clothing at the Goodwill Impact Centre in Edmonton. The Impact Centre sends these clothes to regional manufacturers to be recycled into industrial rags and other products.

Legislators need to bring in extended producer responsibility rules to force clothing manufacturers to make easy-to-recycle fabrics, said Christina Seidel, executive director of the Recycling Council of Alberta.

“Until the material is being made better so it actually can be recycled, we’re not going to recycle it.”

I could donate my socks to charity if they were in better condition.

Donating clothes can reduce waste, but it has limits, as only a fraction of donations gets sold locally, McQueen said. The vast majority (about 80 per cent, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates) gets shipped overseas to places like Africa, where it floods local markets and often ends up landfilled. McQueen said people should research charities before donating clothes to ensure their donations are used locally instead of being landfilled or shipped abroad.

Sock solutions

The Edmonton region now has a handful of companies which recycle textiles in some form or another. One of them is Blenderz Garment Recyclers, which sorts and resells donated clothing and runs classes on how to turn scrap fabric into bags, pillows, stuffed animals, and other items.

Owner Sarah Janzen said she founded Blenderz two years ago when she was struggling to find second-hand fabric to use in her son’s sweatpants. She learned area thrift stores were poised to throw roomfuls of clothes into the dump, and started gathering up their unwanted material. Now, her volunteers sort through about 3,000 pounds of donations a week to sell locally, repair, or use in crafts. Maybe five pounds of that material — mostly packaging, zippers, and buttons — ends up in the trash each week.

When I ask Janzen what I could do with my old socks, she pulls out a large multicoloured mat.

“This is what we make with old socks,” she said.

Socks can be woven together to produce multicoloured throw-rugs, she explained — you can crank one out in about three hours with a loom and five pounds of socks. You can also use a sock as a hair tie, pulley, patch, rag, or dog toy.

“Your creativity is your limit!” she said.

St. Albert quilting instructor Joanne Wozniak is a frequent customer at Blenderz and has made several of those throw-rugs. Her basement is stacked with bolts of multicoloured fabric and bins bursting with pre-cut squares, with quilts of all colours covering every wall and surface.

“Clothes for three kids is not cheap,” Wozniak said, so she learned to make her own clothes from scrap fabrics.

Fabric from worn-out clothes isn’t as durable as new material, but that’s less of a concern with decorative quilts, Wozniak said. She can scavenge about seven six-inch squares of material from a typical shirt, which she often compiles into commemorative memory quilts.

“These were tops that we made for my mom,” she said, pointing out patches on one such quilt.

“I remember when mom wore that apron. I remember when dad wore those shirts.”

I could also take my socks to the Goodwill Impact Centre in northern Edmonton.

The centre gets an “astronomical” amount of clothing each year in addition to tables, chairs, and other household goods, said Doug Roxburgh, director of brand integrity and marketing with Goodwill Industries of Alberta. The centre kept about 19 million tonnes of material out of the landfill last year — a roughly 90 per cent diversion rate.

About 90 per cent of the material donated to Goodwill is still usable, Roxburgh said. Staff put items out for sale at Goodwill outlets for five weeks before sending them to the Impact Centre. There, crews pile the stuff into boat-sized blue bins for sale by the pound.

“These bins are on the floor for about 25 minutes, that’s it,” Roxburgh said, as another rolled out for eager customers to paw through.

“We have shoppers here all day.”

Unwanted items return to the backrooms where crews sort them into jumbo cardboard boxes. Most of the textiles get bound into cubicle-sized cubes and sent to local and regional processors to be turned into wiping rags or insulation. Some gets chopped up by Impact Centre staff to be sold as cleaning cloths — they divert about 10,000 kg of textiles a year that way. Earlier this month, staffers started cutting up old jeans to sell as craft kits.

“We will try to find a purpose for absolutely every piece of fabric,” Roxburgh said.

Reduce and reuse first

Blenderz and Goodwill can’t take all our old socks — there’s simply too much textile waste for them to handle.

I could reduce my clothing waste by buying less of it. Instead of buying that suit I use once a decade, I could rent one instead. Companies such as The Dress Library offer many clothing rentals, while MUD Jeans lets you lease its jeans for 12 months, after which you can either keep them or return them for recycling into new denim.

I could buy better socks. Sturdier clothes are easier to repair and resell, and stay out of the landfill longer, Janzen noted.

“If you lose weight, have (the waist) taken in. If you gain weight, have it let out.”

And I could treat my clothes with respect. Before I toss my old socks, I should think about what went into making them, and what they mean to me now.

“Things do have memories,” Wozniak said. “What did you do in that shirt? Where did you go? Who were you with?”

My sock has a hole in it, but I can still wear it around the house. I think it still has a few miles left in it.

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St. Albert quilter Joanne Wozniak demonstrates how to use scavenged fabrics to construct a quilt. She teaches quilting through St. Albert Further Education.



Sarah Janzen of Blenderz Garment Recyclers demonstrates how flexible fabrics in socks can be woven into rugs. Blenderz promotes the upcycling of unwanted clothes into new goods.



Some unwanted clothes get upcycled into cleaning cloths for resale through the Goodwill Impact Centre. Some 10,000 kg of textiles were kept out of the dump in 2021 through these efforts.



Blenderz Garment Recyclers has received provincial recognition for its efforts to recycle clothes into new items, such as this stuffed animal.