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APPAREL

Bamboo gets next to the skin

By Vartan Kupelian

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Bamboo is nature's most sustainable and renewal resource. It grows without pesticides or chemicals and it is 100 percent biodegradable. It is also anti-microbial and hypoallergenic.

"And it feels great on the skin," said Margarita Angelatos, director of designs for Lela Designs, a Vancouver, British Columbia-based apparel manufacturer.

What's bamboo doing against the skin?

Looking nice, keeping cool and increasingly beginning to show up on golf courses. Bamboo fiber is becoming a desirable source for golf apparel manufacturers and its wicking properties make it a good fit for any leisure time activity.

In addition to Lela Designs, Aureus, Trigelle, Moseau and Lord Daniel also offer product lines featuring bamboo technology.

Aureus unveiled its BambooTech line of apparel at the 2007 Merchandise Show in Orlando. The BambooTech products are all 100 percent natural and non-synthetic.

Bamboo has been around in apparel form for five or six years, according to Geoff Stiles, vice-president/sales and marketing for Aureus.

"It's a proven product -- that's why we have gotten into it," Stiles said.

Stiles' interest in bamboo as a fiber began to peak when he "started hearing more and more from high-end retail outside of golf world" about its applications.

"It's fresh and new," Stiles said. "There's a buzz."

In addition to its eco-friendly properties, bamboo apparel offers a fabric with a natural sheen and comfort.

"The phenomenal thing is just the feel," Stiles said. "Any time someone experiences it they say it feels like cashmere. I always felt it was more like silk. I wouldn't go as far as (saying) cashmere."

"The feel is phenomenal, the drape is phenomenal. It's soft. There's a luxury aspect to it and a great shine, like a mercerized product, but it's all natural."

Bamboo works on many fronts because of its prolific nature. It's one of the world's fastest-growing plants. A bamboo plant reaches maturity in four years, sometimes less, compared to 25 to 70 years for commercial tree species in the United States. Some species of bamboo can grow up to four feet a day. It has a root system which sends out an average of four to six new shoots a year to naturally replenish.

In addition, it is sustainable -- it grows without pesticides or fertilizers. And it is 100 percent biodegradable and anti-microbial which makes it a 21st Century plant.

Bamboo has been used for paper for centuries. Modern processes now enable its use in yarn and fabric. Its abundance makes it affordable and cost-effective for manufacturers and, at the end of the sales cycle, for the consumer.

"Bamboo wicks moisture 30 percent faster than plain cotton and dries faster," Stiles said. "It has built-in stain and UV protection (SPF 15 without chemical application) and is anti-bacterial to help prevent odor retention."

Aureus's BambooTech is a 70/30 blend of bamboo to cotton.

The Aureus line will initially consist of two shirts, two sweaters and a sweatshirt/fleece, all offered in eight colors and sizes up to XXXL, with a MSRP of \$55 for the shirts, \$75 for the sweater and \$65 for the fleece. Stiles said the BambooTech line will be expanded for spring, 2008. It will appeal to golf shop operators and retail because of handsome margins.

The price won't be the only thing that's cool.

"Bamboo is thermal regulating," Angelatos said. "It keeps you cooler in the summer and helps regulate warmth in winter."

Angelatos said Lela Designs uses spun bamboo, "which in my mind is a better quality ... it's made more like cotton and it pills less."

To deal with a shrinkage rate that is higher than cotton, Aureus and Lela pre-shrink the bamboo fabric.

"The consumer won't have to deal with (shrinkage)," said Stiles, who pushed back production to investigate and solve the issue. "The way we work around this now is we double pre-wash it. If you don't pre-wash bamboo, shrinkage is as high as 17 percent. My lab specs now have it down to about 4.5 and 6 percent, depending on the batch. From a manufacturing standpoint we have to pre-wash it pretty heavily. Pre-shrunk does the trick."

Tip of the day

"I recommend washing (bamboo) in cold water and hanging to dry," Margarita Angelatos said. "I recommend that for cotton as well. What you definitely don't want to do is dry in high heat."

What it means

Pilling: An unsightly problem created when fibers gather into small balls on the fabric surface due to abrasion during wear.

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