

Thousands of African smallholder farmers now grow organic cotton, used in clothing, cotton wool and other textiles sold in Europe.

Organic cotton cultivation has brought these farming families significant benefits in health, welfare and income but global cotton prices are notoriously unstable, even for organic cotton. So farmers are anxious not to be dependent on cotton alone for their cash income and keen to find better markets for the food crops they grow.

Farmers also plant useful trees along their field borders, such as cashew nut trees or hibiscus shrubs. Hibiscus flowers are used to make a delicious red fruit drink known as bissap in West Africa. Farm families also care for wild trees like the shea nut which produces oil-rich fruits used in cooking.

Fibre, Food & Beauty for Poverty Reduction is a joint project of PAN Germany, PAN UK, OBEPAB from Benin and Enda Pronat from Senegal. It aims to raise awareness among European businesses, donors, civil society organisations and consumers about trade models which can help reduce poverty. Partners seek ethical trading relations between cotton-based organic projects and European food and cosmetic companies.

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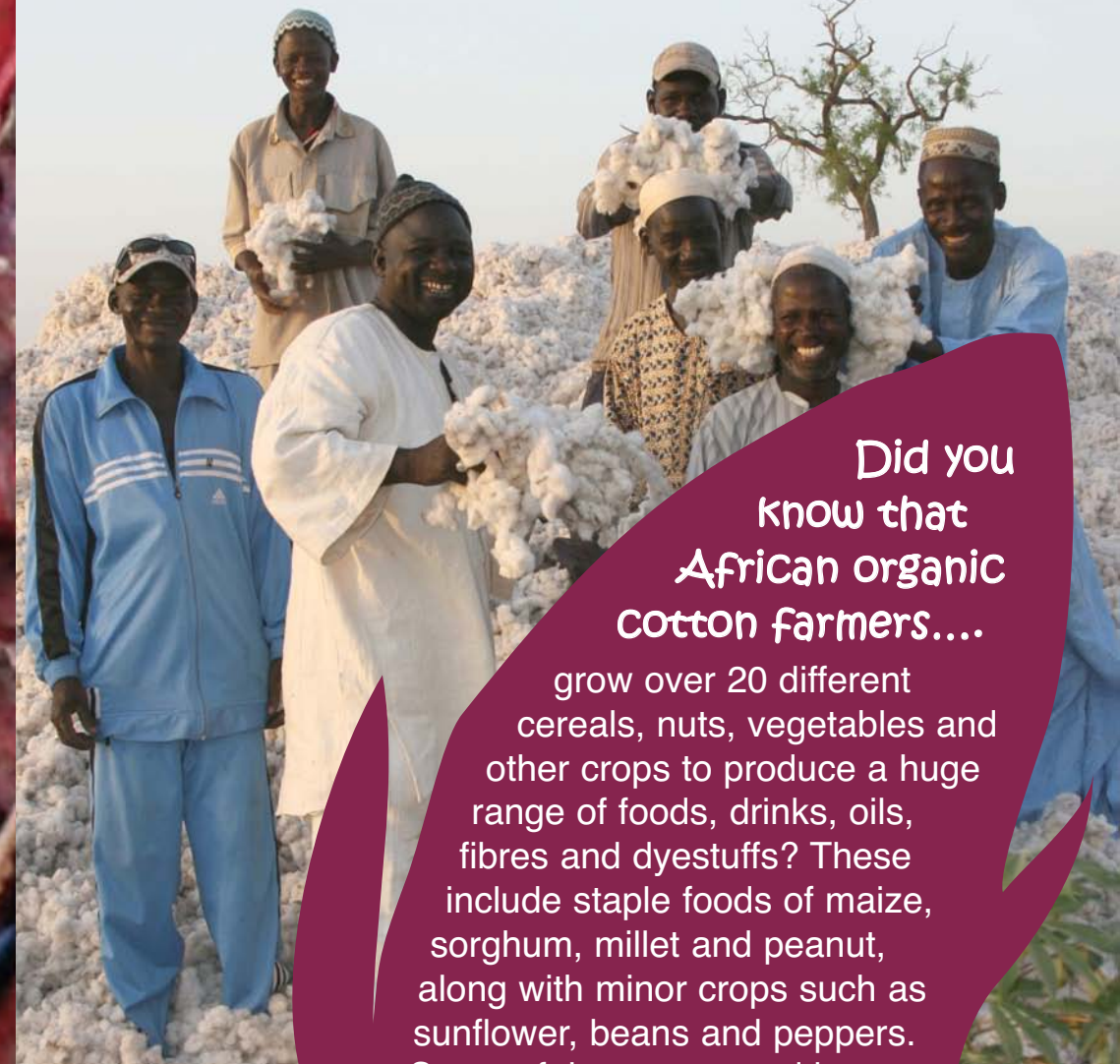
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Hibiscus, Cashew and Cotton - what's the common thread?

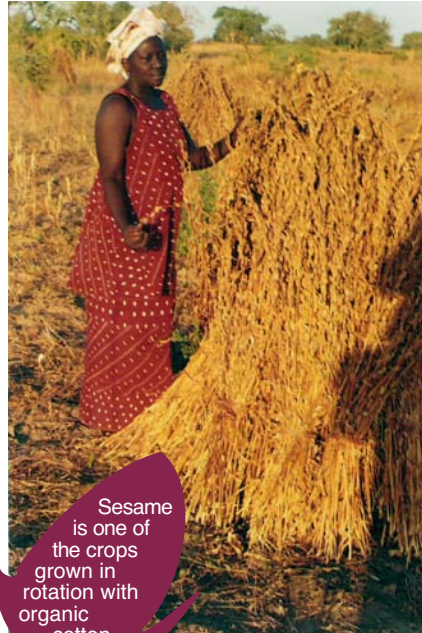


Did you know that African organic cotton farmers....

grow over 20 different cereals, nuts, vegetables and other crops to produce a huge range of foods, drinks, oils, fibres and dyestuffs? These include staple foods of maize, sorghum, millet and peanut, along with minor crops such as sunflower, beans and peppers. Some of these are used by the household, while others are sold in local or regional markets, or for export.



Good for the soil and good for farming families



Sesame is one of the crops grown in rotation with organic cotton

Organic farming is not just leaving out agrochemicals— instead it aims to build an ecologically-based farming system that is in balance with nature. Under organic principles, good crop rotation – sowing different crops on a particular field each season – is essential. The aim is to prevent the build-up of harmful insect pests or crop disease sources, which is especially important for organic farmers since they do not spray synthetic pesticides. A popular rotation in Senegal is peanut in the first year; followed by two different cereals in the second and third years; cotton in the fourth; and then a year fallow to let the soil rest.

African organic cotton farmers also plant different crops within one field, which helps to confuse pests and discourage disease. Sunflower works as a good ‘trap crop’ which is highly attractive to key pests like the cotton bollworm. Pests congregate in the trap crops, leaving the main crops largely pest-free. Legume rotation crops (peas and beans) are especially important to organic farmers, who do not use artificial fertiliser, because these plants fix nitrogen, providing essential nutrients for plant growth. Legumes are vital as a source of protein for families who may not be able to afford meat or dairy.

By growing a wide range of food crops, which are not sprayed with pesticide, organic cotton farmers help provide safe and healthy food for local communities.

Organic cotton growing between rows of cashew nut trees

Improving market options for food crops



Most food crops grown on African organic cotton farms are used by the family or sold in local markets. However, growing food for local markets is not always an attractive option as prices are often low. Farmers in organic cotton projects in Senegal and Benin want to increase their options in local markets but demand from local consumers and traders for organic versions of their food crops is still limited.

The farmer associations are therefore exploring opportunities for exporting selected food crops. Demand is increasing in European markets for organic supplies of several of the food crops that they already grow. More consumers and food companies are taking an interest in sourcing from African smallholders for ethical reasons, supporting farm families through ‘trade, not aid’, to help combat poverty in rural areas.

Organic farmer associations in Senegal and Benin are working with local NGOs Enda Pronat and OBEPAB to focus on European export options for five of their food crops: hibiscus; sesame; fonio cereal; cashew and sheanut. These have been chosen by

farmers because they can be fairly easily grown and are useful rotation crops in their organic farming systems. None of the crops are a part of the staple diet so cultivating them for export will not undermine local food security.

Sesame seeds and cashew nuts are well-known in Europe and widely used in a range of cereals, snacks, as well as cooking oils. Sheanut butter is a valued ingredient for cosmetic use. Hibiscus flowers are less well-known but can be used for colouring, flavourings and make a delicious fruit juice, rich in vitamin C and anti-oxidants. Fonio is a tiny cereal grain, used traditionally in West Africa as a special treat food at family gatherings. Fonio is gluten-free, rich in protein and easy to digest and can be integrated into a huge range of recipes using rice or wheat flour.

What you can do to support African farm families

-  Ask your retailer for organic and Fairtrade products containing sesame, honey, cashews and other nuts and dried and fresh fruits and vegetables from Africa.
-  Find out about the good stories behind food grown by African organic and Fairtrade smallholders at the Fibre, Food & Beauty webpages at www.pan-uk.org/foodAfrica
-  Express your views on the ethics of food from Africa on PAN UK’s web poll www.pan-uk.org/foodAfrica
-  Find out more about organic cotton production in Africa and its benefits at PAN UK’s one-stop information centre at www.WearOrganic.org
-  Find out where you can buy organic clothing and textiles in stores and on-line via PAN UK’s Shop for organic cotton consumer directory at www.WearOrganic.org

