



Organically Grown

The transition from 'eco' to 'organic' is one that a number of consumer products appear to be attempting. But can the same be said for leather, and if so, what are the benefits of 'organic leather'?

Since the early 1990s, 'organic' products have experienced increasing popularity among some businesses and consumers. The rise of organic agricultural produce, organic make-up and hygiene products and organic cotton has led not only to an increased awareness but also to a greater demand from consumers to know where the products they buy come from and how they have been made.

With another marketing claim to use, it is not surprising that several companies have sprouted up over the last few years offering 'organic' leather. To their credit, they appreciate the benefit of using leather as a material and have not tried to follow the oxymoron of vegan leather — something that might look like leather but comes from petrocarbons. Such companies try to go one step further than producers of 'eco-leather'; not only are their hides vegetable-, rather than chrome-tanned, but the hides themselves come from animals which have been organically reared.

California-based leather-selling company Organic Leather was founded in 2006 by Rowan Gabrielle, a businesswoman who describes herself as "a pioneer in the eco fashion industry". At the time, Organic Leather was one of the first companies of its kind and was established by Ms Gabrielle in an attempt to promote and restore the balance between humanity and nature. "At Organic Leather we choose to actively honour our sacred relationship to

the land and her animals," the website states. "Traditionally, leather was worn for protection, warmth and as a power piece, a way of venerating the animal's essence.

"It is our intention to return reverence to the practice of working with leather. We have chosen the tanneries that we work with very carefully, and the hides we use are, wherever possible from the wild, from organic or small family farms or free range, grass fed herds."

Natureally Organic Leather uses organically raised rare breed cattle hides from select farms in the UK, which are then veg-tanned to create 'organic' leather.

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK





Few and far between

One of the problems facing companies such as Organic Leather is the comparatively small number of organic farms from which to acquire hides and the sparse number of 'eco' tanneries in which to have them tanned. Leather is still a by-product, and it is rare for abattoirs to separate hides which come from organically-reared animals from those from non-organically-reared animals; as Dr Phil Hadley, southwest regional manager of EBLEX (an organisation for the English beef and sheep industry) suggests: "It would be my perception that if a company is offering organic leather based on organic hides and an organic vegetable-tan process, they're probably sourcing those hides in relatively small numbers from artisan-type abattoirs. If you were a major processor processing 5,000 organic hides a week I'd question whether there would be that many in the country (UK) at any one time."

About 5% of the total beef production in the UK is organic; so a company specialising in organic leather could not compete with one selling regular leather.



Ilona Ludewig-Mack, founder of Natureally Organic Leather, tries to select hides from organically reared animals, as she believes luxury and organic should go hand in hand.

CREDIT: NATUREALLY ORGANIC LEATHER

Dr Hadley also believes it would be very difficult to persuade abattoirs to pay farmers more for hides from organically-reared animals. That aside, he does not believe that a hide from an organically-reared animal would necessarily be superior in quality to that of a non-organically-reared animal. "Organic farmers have quite strict requirements about the products that they can use, to control parasites in particular. A non-organic farmer who works on a farm that has parasites can anticipate that he'll get a parasite [problem] each year and therefore he can, as a prevention measure, treat the cattle at the right time of year to ensure they remain free of parasites. An organic farmer actually has to demonstrate that he's got the parasite before he can treat it, so that he's not treating routinely, but as a result of infection or infestation. So one of the complications with organic is that you have to actually demonstrate a parasite problem before you can do anything about it. And I imagine that by the time you've demonstrated a lice population to treat, they will already have done damage to the hide.



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"Of course across a population of 100 non-organic hides you would have some good, some bad, and that'd be the same with organic; but potentially they could have a higher incidence of damage than hides from conventional production."

Why organic?

Which raises the question, if not its superior quality, then what are the benefits of organic leather? According to Ilona Ludewig-Mack, who in 2009 founded UK-based leather-selling company, Natureally Organic Leather, it's the 'eco' aspect of organic leather that is most appealing. "The extra care we take to be environmentally sustainable is precisely what makes our leather so desirable," Ms Ludewig-Mack says. "Consumers embrace brands that value sustainability, and if you can do that in luxury, the response can be tremendous."

In January this year, the London-based company began looking for partners in the US, to assist in introducing its brand of "ethical luxury" to US consumers. The company uses certified organic rare breed cattle hides from select farms in the UK. The hides are tanned using a vegetable

tanning process, and the resulting leathers are left unvarnished and uncoated.

Offering beautiful, luxurious finished leather is top of Ms Ludewig-Mack's priorities, and she believes luxury and organic are inseparable. "Doing organic just by itself is not enough; that's why I say that what I make is the most beautiful leather you can get – and it's also organic which is great. But I'd heard from designers before that the problem with getting organic leather is that it's just the occasional hide here or there. But if you want consistency, if you want to do a proper collection, and you want to rely on it being the same over and over again, then you can't produce it, you can't just catch one animal and make one skin. So I needed to combine the ethics of the organic with something that works in today's world, to find traditional methods but then make them usable for today." Ms Ludewig-Mack insists on only using hides from organically-reared animals, and even after this stage, is very selective about the hides she uses. "We're not doing any cheating in that we are not covering up the surface of our leather; so if it's not good quality then that's no good. If

you go to a farm where people really care and they know their animals well, then you tend to see that the quality of the skin is better. Contrary to popular belief, rearing animals organically means keeping them in harmony with their habitat, which in turn makes routine parasite and vaccine treatments unnecessary."

Ms Ludewig-Mack insists that the hides she has tanned in a tannery accredited by the German TÜV Organisation only come from organically-reared animals, and even after this stage, is very selective about the hides she uses.

For some, organic is going too far, while for others, it is an inevitable step in the rebalancing of the environment and the consumer products that abound. Whether organic leather is a growing industry or one that will remain a niche market remains to be seen. If companies such as Organic Leather and Natureally Organic Leather continue to promote leather as a beautiful, sustainable and 'ethical' product then it may add to the industry — if they claim product quality superiority on the basis of their ethical views, they could be easily challenged. ☉

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