

in the know

fabric focus

linum usitatissimum ... linen

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Have you ever wondered about the durability of linen fabric? When the tomb of Tutankamen was opened in 1881, the linen curtains which had been placed in there at least 3,000 years ago were still intact.

Linen, or *linum usitatissimum*, Latin for "most useful linen," is a natural product made from the fibers of the stalk of the flax plant. An annual which is sown in April, the plant produces beautiful blue and pink flowers. When harvested, the entire plant is pulled from the ground to assure long, straight fibers for weaving. The plant goes through several processes including forced decomposition (retting), sun drying and removal of the bark (breaking, scutching, hackling and gilling) before it is spun into a yarn used to weave fabric.

The linen industry is more than 4,000 years old. Early production methods of linen have been seen on ancient hieroglyphics across Egypt. White linen was considered a symbol of divine light and purity and associated with the mother goddess, Isis.

Used for curtains, upholstery, tablecloths, bed sheets, tea towels and even artist's canvases, linen fabrics are virtually lint free, non-static, non-allergenic and naturally insect repellent. When examined under a microscope, a piece of 6,000-year-old linen used to wrap a mummy was found to be as structurally perfect as linen made today.

Modern manufacturers often combine linen fabrics with man-made products such as Lycra. Although the fabric dyes beautifully, it is so dense that it is difficult to get a good saturation when printed. This is why many linen prints are designed to look worn.

With a water absorption rate of twice its own weight, linen becomes softer and brighter when washed. When choosing linen for a custom treatment, consider if you will need to launder the product. Most kitchen and dining products and bed linens can be washed. However, window treatments and decorative pillows will look best if the treatments are made from fabric that has been untouched.

Tips for washing linen:

Wash in medium temperatures with a gentle detergent. Use oxygen-type bleaches instead of chlorine bleach which will yellow your fabric. Rinse the linen in a loosely packed washer with lots of water to remove all detergent and residual dirt. Tumble-drying will over-dry the fibers so it is best to line dry. To keep white linens looking their best, dry them in the sun. Iron linen while it is still damp or spray heavily with water to re-dampen before ironing.

If you are having a treatment made from linen and feel you definitely need to launder it, buy a yard of the fabric first to test it in the washer and determine if you like the results. Your designer or workroom will need to add several extra yards to your order to allow for fabric shrinkage which can be as much as 25 percent. Be aware that many workrooms may charge extra to iron the fabric before they begin the project. ✕