

Women Inventors

Part 4: Sally Fox

By SUSAN CASEY

When Sally Fox was growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, she loved hand-spinning and weaving. She would even spin the fur that was shed by her family dog. "I got a spinning wheel for my 13th birthday," she said. "A love of insects also led me to organic gardening." In 1982, while working in Davis, Calif., Fox combined her interest in spinning with her interest in organic farming. She developed organically grown, naturally colored cottons for widespread use. "The two loves of my childhood," said Fox, "came together when I came across this cotton."

The development of colored-cotton agriculture began around 2700 BC in Indo-Pakistan, Egypt and Peru. At that time, cotton grew naturally in several colors, including tan, gray and reddish-brown. The fibers were shorter and weaker than those of white cotton. That became important during the 18th century with the beginning of the industrial revolution. The long-fibered white cotton spun well on machines and colored cotton did not.

"I was working for a plant breeder," said Fox, who by then had earned a master's degree in entomology, the science that studies insects, "and asked why we weren't breeding the colored cotton to the longer white cotton to improve the spinning quality. He told me there wasn't a market for colored cotton. I asked, 'Why don't we make one?' He said, 'Why don't you make one?'" That set Fox on her path.

On her own time, Fox used the coyote brown cottonseeds the breeder gave her, (ancestor of the brown variety of cotton) to grow a dozen plants in

pots on her mother's porch. They were naturally pest-resistant, which was important to Fox. She had witnessed the misuse of pesticides when she served in the Peace Corps in Gambia in West Africa. The naturally colored cotton of the plants she grew was brown and green. In years that followed, she developed plants that were stronger and of other colors. She then crossbred them with the long-fiber white cotton used for machine spinning. She developed Foxfibre®—the first commercially spinnable, naturally colored cotton. She later gained a patent for her cotton's flame-resistant qualities. In 1989 she founded Natural Cotton Colours Inc. Today Foxfibre® can be found in products ranging from clothes to bedsheets.

At age 45, Fox continues her research and is looking forward to increased

production of her cotton with the opening of a new mill dedicated to the spinning of her cotton. "I felt called to work on the cotton in a way that seems as though the work is my vocation," she said. "I feel that the cotton has so many really special qualities. It is an honor to have been able to devote my life to its development."

Friday: Patsy Sherman

Kids, March is Women's History Month. This year's theme is "Women Sustaining the American Spirit." For more information, visit www.nwhp.org/whm/themes/themes.html.

Susan Casey is author of "Women Invent! Two Centuries of Discoveries That Have Shaped Our World," from Chicago Review Press. This story will be on The Times' Web site at www.latimes.com/kids.

Madam Walker

Sally Fox

Martha Coston

Patsy Sherman

Bette Graham

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