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Designers have lots of haute surprises in store for pet holiday fashion.

Getting It Down to A Tee
The classic fashion trend grows and reflects our popular culture.

Pet Fashion Week a Success
More exhibitors and a 66 percent increase in the number of buyers, including more from outside the U.S., added to the August event's excitement.

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Weaving a Greener Future
Her mother’s illness inspired Jean Chae to go organic with Simply Fido.

By Meghan E. Murphy

Five years ago, Jean Chae wasn’t even working for her family’s toy business. But today the art director has helped her family turn Simply Fido in Brooklyn, N.Y., into an all organic, environmentally friendly company that’s paving the way for all-natural toy production.

Chae joined her family’s business when her mother was diagnosed with stage-three liver cancer and could no longer work. But she didn’t just take her mother’s place, she also took her advice.

Chae’s mother refused chemotherapy to treat her cancer and instead turned to a natural, healthy lifestyle. Before long, the focus on an organic way of living rubbed off on the family’s business.

Simply Fido History
Jean Chae’s parents have manufactured toys for dogs and children for 30 years, but it wasn’t until Chae was at an international toy festival five years ago that she thought about how their products impact the earth. After hearing all her mother’s platitudes on eating right, she says she thought “Oh my god. What are we really making for these children? The plastic and polyester toys get thrown away. What about organic toys that are good for the earth and good for us?”

The organic, natural craze wasn’t booming at the time, so the Chae’s had to create their own methods of making organic dog toys. They experimented with materials and processes to make sure the products were non-toxic and high quality.

The only organic cotton the Chae’s could find for their fabric was produced in Tibet. So that raw material had to be shipped to their Shanghai factory to be dyed with herb-based colors and set in water instead of chemicals.

Finding a color that is both organic and appealing was a difficult task. Before joining the family business, Chae was an art director at an advertising agency, so she insisted that the product had to look good.

“My biggest dilemma when looking at other organic products was that this precious organic cotton was made into a product that’s not so attractive,” she says. “If we’re going to use these wonderful resources, I said ‘Let’s make it really pretty.’”

Refining the new toys took the Chae family about two years. When they launched the product line, response from store owners and consumers was beyond their imagination. Because of the slow production process, the toys were sometimes out of stock for up to three months, Chae says.

The Importance of Education
Chae also aims to educate consumers with the packaging of the Simply Fido products. Each new retailer receives a poster about the benefits of organic products, and Chae always talks with store owners about the products.

“Educating pet owners is key,” she says.
Efficiency And Ecology

SimplyFido is continually striving for better efficiency so the company recently opened an ecologically friendly factory to streamline the process and ensure quality control. Chae believes it may be the first factory in China certified by the Organic Consumers Association.

Some of the eco-friendly features in the factory include a recycling process that uses gray water from Shanghai's largest tofu factory, and an ultraviolet sterilization system. There is also a vacuum that constantly sucks dust from the air, so the workers don't breathe in cotton dust.

"What good is it if we get to make good toys, but we're not considering our workers' health?" Chae says.

Eventually all of the toy fabric will be made in the Shanghai factory so the Chae's can oversee the quality of all material. With high-quality ingredients and a longer manufacturing process, SimplyFido toys are more expensive than other pet toys. But customers and pet store owners don't seem to mind. Chae says people are willing to pay more because they know they're getting an environmentally and pet-friendly product.

Chae adds that the family's goal is not to focus on how much the toys cost. The Chae's want to lead factories around the world, and especially in China, to see the light and lessen their impact on the earth.

"We try not to make it about the price of toys. We think it's more like a mission for us," she says. "We want other people to follow and be aware of the things that are going on in China. We haven't really shown them the role model; they've never seen it. They've never heard the 'organic' word; it's just very foreign to them."

In fact, the family returned to China in July to educate all of their workers about the environment, and how they can live naturally to improve their lives and those of their children and pets.

All Simply Fido toys go through a UV sterilization process to kill germs and bacteria before being packed. (This process is not required by any industry, but the company felt that it was necessary to ensure the safety of their products for pets and babies.)