

Consumers Want Luxury And Comfort of Wool: Manufacturers Are Responding With New Blends



LEGGWEAR fashions

by CHARLENE NELSON,
Fashion Editor

A growing consumer demand for the natural luxury, comfort and wicking properties of wool has manufacturers experimenting with new blends and applications in fashion and sports socks. The results are some new versions of an age-old fiber:

"I think all manufacturers are using wool blends more because the American consumer understands the values of wool fibers. Quality wools are becoming more acceptable and understood by the general public," explains Matthew Mull of Gold Toe Women's brands. The Europeans understood and appreciated the fine grade wools for many years, and now the American consumer appreciates and expects this same quality."

"We are knitting more and more wool as consumers and retailers have continually embraced it due to its benefits," adds Jay Johnson of Johnson Hosiery Mills.

Consumers like wool because it offers them certain benefits cotton can't compete with, say manufacturers: a natural warming ability, superior wicking, durability, color retention, and first and foremost: Wool is luxurious and comfortable to wear:

"Gone are the days of low-grade, itchy wools," says Mull.

Manufacturers are finding that wool blends also provide interesting applications in fashion socks and tights.

"One of my favorite qualities is the great illusion of texture it provides with its lofty appearance," explains Ame L. Luther of Acme-McCrary Corporation. "And, it does it naturally. No other fiber can really obtain that without being blended.

"Blended wool can provide a different hand in the fiber," adds Luther. "For example, cotton can actually make it (wool) softer while giving it a little more loft. And, a shiny yarn can provide a shine that is pretty with the contrast of the wool and its bulky fibers."

Acme-McCrary is using more wool in fashion socks and heavy weight tights, says Luther: New products are being made of wool mixes of angora and lambs wool which is sometimes twisted for a marled effect. The manufacturer is also blending wool with modal for a softer, more draped look.

Another popular combination is wool mixed with cotton and rayon.

Gold Toe also is incorporating the comfort of lambs wool in its new ladies All Day Comfort line. The line's light and mid-weight crews and knee highs are constructed of Superfine Merino Lambs Wool blended with Outlast.

"The Merino Lambs Wool has the softest hand feel of any wool in its class and provides the styles with the natural wicking features, abrasion-resistance and warmth we all expect from the natural wool fiber," says Mull. "The Outlast yarn makes these great socks even better with its temperature-control fibers that make your feet feel comfortable all day long."

For fall 2005, Gold Toe also has introduced a variety of women's products using wool and wool blends including

light-weight dress fashion styles blended with acrylic and 20 percent wool; light and medium knee-highs with 60 percent wool blends and medium and heavy weight casual fashion styles with multiple variations for novelty wools and blends.

For men, Gold Toe is also launching a Wool/Outlast fashion assortment with sophisticated colors and patterns. A blend of lambs wool and Outlast, the socks are faster than previous Gold Toe Men's Fashion, according to Gold Toe Brands Marketing Manager R. Stephen Boyd. They will have 32 percent lambs wool and 36 percent Outlast Temperature Control.

Johnson Hosiery Mills is knitting from 100 percent Merino Wool and blends of 90 percent wool and 10 percent nylon to make men's fashion dress patterns including argyles and neats for fall, according to Jay Johnson.

Wool has been a mainstay in sports socks because of its natural wicking characteristics, but Moretz Sports is experimenting with some new blends to maximize mixing wool and other high tech fibers in its performance socks.

"We are experimenting with wool and other high-tech fibers such as mixing CoolMax with wool and wool with polypropylene," says Aaron Caldwell. "In doing so, we are creating a very unique product.

"When combined properly, the natural fiber can provide better performance and comfort. The wool and wool blends provide warmth that other hosiery fibers do not provide."

Moretz Sports' Power Sox Outdoor Classics feature Wool Ultra and Isolwool. The fibers create a technically advanced fiber blend which Caldwell says is 20 percent lighter than any other fiber wools. "Wool Ultra effectively combats odor, reduces more friction and absorbs more force while at the same time, providing better performance, durability, and support," says Caldwell. Isolwool also is easy to wash, extra warm and light, soft and voluminous and extremely durable. A range from 34 percent to 78 percent wool is in our range of socks."

N.C. Sock Co. is making a heavy wool boot sock which is a blend of wool, acrylic and nylon to meet the market need for a heavy work or boot sock.

Power Sox Outdoor Classics by Moretz Sports feature Wool Ultra and Isolwool

