

Linen in ancient Egypt

Linen is one of the oldest textiles' fibres in the world, and was used by Ancient Egyptians. It derives from a plant known as flax. To grow, flax needs rich soil, plenty of water and frequent weeding. For this reason the rich soil of the Valley of Nile was perfect for this crop. The Egyptians sowed the flax in the middle of November when the River Nile flooded and, after about three months, they harvested it pulling from the ground. The plants were tied then into bundles and allowed to dry in the sun.

Much work was needed before the linen could be used for weaving textiles (see procedure [overside](#)). After all this work, it is not surprising that fabrics were considered very important and precious by the Egyptians. They used linen mainly for clothing, perfect to wear in the hot Egyptian weather: the people on the model of wooden boat [\[Egypt 12\]](#) are shown to be wearing simple white tunics probably made of linen. Linen was also part of the mummification process. Cloth was necessary during the mummification process for wrapping the mummy and speeding the body's dehydration. Egyptians mummified not only people but also some cats [\[Death 1\]](#) and other animals believing that a mummified animal could carry messages and prayers to the gods.

In modern cultures, clothes are simple to buy and replace, but the ancients looked after fabrics very carefully and often recycled their clothes. The Egyptians, for example, reused old clothing that had covered the statues of gods during the ceremonies to make bandages for mummies. The Museum's Coptic textiles [\[see the display at the entrance\]](#) represent another good example of how the ancient Egyptians recycled their clothes. When the linen tunic had worn out, they removed the beautifully decorated and precious panels and edging sewed them onto other plain tunics.

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How to make linen from flax

1. Comb the dried stalks of flax, to remove the seeds
2. Soak the stalks in water for about 14 days, to remove the bark.
3. Leave the stems to dry in the sun for a few hours.
4. Beat the stems until the fibres from the woody section of the plant separate.
5. Wrap the fine fibres in rolls, ready to be spun.
6. Twist the linen fibres together using a spindle, weighted by a spindle whorl [[Egypt 13](#)] to kept the spindle in motion during the spinning process.



Flax bundles