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The Story Behind Reebok's New Sustainable Cotton + Corn Unisex Sneakers

By [Jennie Bell](#)



Reebok NPC UK Cotton + Corn sneakers

CREDIT: COURTESY OF REEBOK

It's been more than a year since [Reebok](#) announced its plan to make sneakers out of plant-based materials — plenty of time for anticipation to build, and, boy, has it.

On Tuesday, Reebok's NPC UK Cotton + Corn unisex sneakers finally hit the brand's website, retailing for \$95, and folks seem pretty excited about the results. As of press time, most sizes were already sold out, and shoppers were prompted to submit requests for back order.

For sneaker lovers — and earth lovers alike — there's plenty to appreciate about the kicks, which come in a neutral (or natural) color scheme and have a understated aesthetic. More importantly, though, they are USDA-certified as using 75 percent bio-based content. The uppers are made from 100 percent cotton, the soles are corn-based, and the removable insoles are derived from castor bean oil. Even the packaging is made from recycled materials.



The NPC UK Cotton + Corn sneakers are made from plant-based materials.

CREDIT: COURTESY OF REEBOK

When FN visited Reebok's headquarters in May, Bill McInnis, head of the brand's innovation team, shared some of the thinking behind the project.

"Currently, all the sneakers on shelves are made from petroleum or oil products — like EVA and artificial rubbers. Oil is not considered sustainable or renewable," he said. "This project makes shoes from things that grow, that are sustainable and renewable."

To source the materials for the shoes, Reebok looked outside the footwear industry and linked up with DuPont Tate & Lyle, a division of DuPont that is focused on bioproducts and is responsible for developing Susterra, made from industrial corn. "They distill [the corn] into the liquid, and that's what we made the bottoms out of. You can make anything else you want out of it, as well — a heel tab or tongue label," said McInnis.

However, Susterra does have one limitation at the moment: It can't be used to make foam for soft midsoles. Instead, the sole of the NPC UK Cotton + Corn sneaker has an open lattice design to create a cushioning effect. "But we're working on a foam," said McInnis. "And once you have that, you can make virtually any [type of sneaker]."

Ultimately, he added, the goal is to create a shoe that is fully biodegradable: “One day you could bury it in your backyard and it will go way in a couple years. Right now, shoes could stay in landfills for hundreds or even thousands of years.”



The NPC UK Cotton + Corn style is unisex.

CREDIT: COURTESY OF REEBOK

The Cotton + Corn project is part of a larger sustainable initiative at the brand, called Planet Reebok.

Interestingly, the phrase Planet Reebok has some history behind it. Originally it was an ad campaign that debuted in the early 1990s, though the message back then had more of a testosterone-fueled bent. (See the ad below.) Now the company is repurposing the phrase to reflect its globally conscious viewpoint.

Planet Reebok 1993



Other initiatives for Planet Reebok include a recent sneaker collaboration with Thread International, a company that makes fabric out of plastics collected from developing countries. The Guresu Thread style is available now [on Reebok.com](#) for \$90.

And McInnis said other ideas are percolating thanks to the brand's new home in Boston's Innovation & Design Building. "One of the advantages of being in this building is, you bump into some interesting companies," he said. "The firm Ginkgo Bioworks here is growing materials out of bacteria. It's very expensive, so I don't know about [its feasibility for us], but it's an interesting idea."

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