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ECOHOLIC

BY ADRIA VASIL

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Saving the earth, one question at a time.

Q: I want to colour my world – are there eco-friendly paint options?

A: It's the time of year when many of us are itching to liven up our digs with a fresh coat of paint – but just how fresh can latex and oil really be for dear old Gaea? Fortunately, the days of slapping liquid lead onto our walls seem to have vanished with the 70s, but today's colour concoctions are still nasty brews. There are about 15,000 chemicals that can be used in the mix. As a rule, alkyd or oil-based paints are much more toxic than water-based ones – they contain up to 60 per cent chemicals, while the latex variety have less than 5 per cent.

Not that water-based paints are great eco saviours. Chances are your favourite brand is made with volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that send ozone-depleting fumes into the atmosphere – not to mention your lungs. Most paint suppliers, even mainstream ones like Colour Your World and Benjamin Moore, now carry lines of low-VOC and even no-VOC paints and finishes.

Note that low-VOC wall paints are generally limited to flat, eggshell and semi-gloss finishes in whites and soft pastels. Brighter, shinier colours require petrochemicals, which give off VOCs. Plus, it's important to realize that VOC-free doesn't mean chemical-free. Some products are still loaded with harsh mildew-fighting fungicides and biocides (a preservative found in most commercial paints).

Farrow and Ball (1054 Yonge, 416-920-0200) sells a clay-based line (\$54.95/gallon) free of VOCs, biocides, fungicides and ammonia. And rather than chemical dyes, natural tints are ground into the product to produce 130 colours.

For entirely natural paints, try something like Eco-House, which is particularly suited for use on concrete, stucco and new drywall. The Canuck brand uses liquid quartz as a base for its extra-durable silica dispersion paint (which can be ordered at 1-877-ECO-HOUSE or www.eco-house.com).

Wood stains can, of course, be just as toxic as wall paint, but there are eco-friendly alternatives out there. Hempola (Big Carrot, 348 Danforth, 416-466-2129 and Grassroots (408 Bloor West, 416-944-1993, among others) is made of – you guessed it! – hemp. It comes in blue, red or natural for \$45. Least toxic of all is milk paint, which has been around since, oh, the stone age. The modern variety is still a natural, non-toxic stain perfect for antiquing furniture and can even be used on plaster or stucco. You can get Canadian Old Fashioned Milk Paint at Nitty Gritty Reproductions (170 King East, 416-364-1393) for \$20.25 or make your own. (See www.canadianhomeworkshop.com/restore_milk.html for details.)

As easy as it is, there's no excuse for dumping paint (even the more earth-friendly types) down the drain or into the dumpster. You can blue box old cans (with a little dried-up paint in them) as long as you remove the lids, or Grassroots will do it for you. The city of Toronto holds paint exchanges (see www.city.toronto.on.ca/environment_days/index.htm for dates and locations). And for those who are homebound, the city's Toxic Taxi does pickups.

Whatever paint you go with, buy no more than you need and reduce the impact of indoor pollutants by circulating the air in your home as often as possible. Leaving a bowl of white vinegar in the room can also help reduce noxious paint smells.



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