

PAINTED GREEN

Start your green home transformation with a can of paint

Pop open a can of paint and you know what to expect — the smell. Conventional paints are a toxic stew of chemicals that release gases — volatile organic compounds (VOCs) — into the air. As green building and renovating have grown in exposure and popularity, virtually every paint manufacturer has begun offering “eco” paint. These low-VOC, low-odor paints are more commonplace, but are they really green? If consumers do their homework, they can breathe easier on future home projects.

Consider this fact: indoor air pollution in a suburban house is worse than outdoor air pollution in a major city. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, indoor air quality, whether in the suburbs, city or country, is a minimum of two to five times worse than outdoor air quality. With today's tightly sealed homes and offices, indoor air doesn't flow like it used to, so it traps odors, contaminants and off-gassing chemicals. At its peak during a painting project, indoor air quality in your home or business can be 1,000 times worse than outdoor air.

Although VOCs (emitted from certain solids or liquids) are regulated by the government to reduce outdoor air pollution, they aren't regulated when it comes to the indoors. Even zero-VOC paint is not guaranteed to be nontoxic, and the chemical-masking agents used in low-odor paints are simply used to hide the smell. In essence, more chemicals are added to an already toxic mix.

And the good stuff is not risk free either. A low- and zero-VOC paint may contain harmful ingredients such as ammonia, acetone and biocides, as the government does not classify these compounds as VOCs. In the case of ammonia, no disclosure of its use is required.



Despite many offenders, there are healthy paints for your home.

Some manufacturers, like AFM Safecoat, have created eco-paints and primers that go far beyond just being zero-VOC. Harmful chemical compounds are left out of the mix because they aren't necessary to make a high-quality paint product. Many are formulated with indoor air quality in mind and, in some cases, are also certified to earn Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) credit points. LEED is a green building standard created by the United States Green Building Council.

Bottom line when buying paint: be wary of the low-odor label and ask questions. You have a right to know if compounds like ammonia or acetone are added. Green building is catching on everywhere, and the information is out there. Whether it's paint, flooring, insulation or countertops, “going green” is more than just what you buy — it's a life philosophy. ■

Todd Ballantyne owns The Environmental Home Store, the region's first green building showroom and resource center. Visit his Web site at www.environmentalhomestore.com.

Do you have a green question for Todd? Send an e-mail to melissa.a.greiner@idearc.com with your thoughts and look for a future Green Scene tackling your topic.