

What makes a Product Green
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There are many variables when it comes to classifying a product as being green. In fact, I would have to declare no product is totally green. Take into consideration the natural resources needed to create a product, the amount of energy it takes to produce it, and the transportation to get the item to the “big box” retailer. You and I buy and consume these items and throw them away when they are no longer useful to us. This scenario can be applied to anything we use or consume. Whether it is a bottle of water, a pencil, a new refrigerator, or gas for our car, everything that we use or consume originates from somewhere.

Knowing how green a product is starts with consumer awareness of how a manufacturer creates an item and how the production process impacts the environment. As consumers, we can choose to purchase from businesses that promote safe, eco-friendly, and sustainable business practices. Many companies are promoting their products through sustainability, which simply means *striving to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations*. Ask yourself the following questions when examining various business practices: Does the business encourage biking, walking or mass transit to get to work? Is there a successful recycling program for paper, cans, and glass in place? Does the business purchase locally when possible? Are plant-based, biodegradable, non-toxic cleaning products being used? Do they have water and energy conservation strategies in place? By knowing something about how a business conducts daily operations, you can make intelligent decisions on how to purchase green products that are healthy for you and the environment. Most companies today *want* you to know they are following green standards.

In thinking about the beautiful blue-green plant, it is hard to comprehend that the natural resources we depend on for the things we consume are in finite supply. It is important to look for materials that have a low impact on the planet. Low impact means using waste, recycled or reclaimed materials from a sustainable-managed source or from local materials.

One way to help the planet is to look for “post consumer” content labels when purchasing paper, carpet, plastics, and metals. For example, a carpet that has a post consumer content of recycled plastic bottles, nylon, cotton or wool, with backing and glues that have low or no off-gassing, is a green carpet. When the carpet has reached the end of its life cycle, the manufacturer will take it back and recycle it into a new carpet. This “closed loop” recyclability where items purchased today are guaranteed not to end up in a landfill tomorrow, is very green and really cool because it will help slow down the process of extracting raw materials from our planet! Adaptive reuse is another fun way to be green. Go antiquing. Breathe life into an old stuffed chair by reupholstering it in a jazzy, bright fabric. Paint or refinish an old table. Embrace the motto, “something old is new again.”

Did you know that indoor air contains five to ten times more pollutants than outdoor air? Carpets, paints, plastics, and cleaning products that create gas harmful VOC's (volatile organic compounds) contribute to this fact. Look for low or no VOC emitting materials. Read labels. Become aware of what is available. Did you know that

most textiles in your home are hazardous waste? They often contain pesticides, heavy metals, dyes, stain-resistant chemicals, stiffeners, and flame retardants that are known to cause health problems. Even though leather appears to be the better choice because of its lasting quality, the tanning treatment process actually remains one of the most chemically intensive and toxic. Cotton production also uses pesticides and harmful agrochemicals that pollute the environment and workers. Wool is often contaminated with moth proofing pesticides. Textile bleaching and dye processing involve toxins such as formaldehyde, dioxins and chlorine. Silk leaves the lightest environmental and health footprint, other good choices are *organic* cotton, linen, and hemp.

Consider the *life cycle analysis* when purchasing an item, defined by how much you pay balanced with how long it will last. Are you in the habit of buying the cheapest thing available, only to throw it away in a short period of time? Or do you pay a little more up front for a quality product and keep it for several years? For example: The bathroom floor is failing. Do you replace this with another vinyl that will last seven to ten years or do you decide to tile? The tile and installation will cost more, but you are investing in a durable, sustainable product that will outlast a vinyl by 30 years. Vinyl has health issues, too. The “new smell” can be attributed to VOC’s releasing unhealthy gas vapors into your home. This can last for several months or longer.

As smart consumers, we can ask questions about the things we buy. Refer to third party certification and eco-labeling. The third party certification is an independent organization with expertise in providing an assessment, verification and identification of a product or company that has met an environmental standard. For example: Green Seal and Energy Star provide non-biased verification of environmental labels and are the most reliable.

Not everything about any one product needs to be “green”. Sometimes making the choice to buy a product with less packaging or putting the item in a reusable cloth bag is the best you can do - to be green today. Habits develop over time. Decisions we make about the products we buy today will determine our choices for the future. If we continue to ask for green, the marketplace will have to manufacture green products. The positive outcome will be more cost effective, healthier choices that have less impact on our fragile planet.

Want to know more?

<http://www.focusonenergy.com/>

<http://www.energystar.gov>

<http://www.epa.gov/watersense/index.htm>

<http://www.storyofstuff.com/>

http://www.mcdonough.com/cradle_to_cradle.htm

http://eartheasy.com/live_nontoxic_solutions.htm

<http://www.greenguard.org/>

<http://ecolabelling.org/>

<http://www.treehugger.com>

<http://www.cosmeticsdatabase.com/>