



A Cleaner Coat

Environmentally friendly paints are catching on—but shop with caution

by Keith Goetzman

When you step into a hardware store these days, you're likely to see new lines of paint specially labeled to lure green consumers concerned about exposure to volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. It's a smart marketing move, since VOCs are a particularly nasty class of airborne gases released when standard wall coatings dry. Unfortunately, the labels "low VOC" and "no VOC" can be misleading.

Do-it-yourselfers need to be aware of a few things: Finding a truly green, clean paint will require a bit of research. It will cost more money. And when it comes to paint labeling and claims, neither the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) nor most big paint makers are always looking out for the health of consumers or the planet. By understanding a few basic facts, though, prospective painters looking for that perfect hue can make better choices.

An easy first step is to use latex paints, which are usually lower in VOCs than oil-based paints. Many consumers have already made the move to latex for the convenience of soap-and-water cleanup.

Then get to know your VOCs. For starters, the EPA's definition of "low" is based not on an indoor health

standard but on an outdoor environmental standard. Consequently, low-VOC paint labels aren't promising toxin-free air as the paint dries, even though the accompanying marketing campaign (and the friendly store clerk) may imply otherwise. The standard simply ensures that the paint has less than 250 grams of VOCs per liter if it's latex, and less than 380 grams per liter if it's oil-based—levels far higher than recommended by many environmental and health experts. To find a paint's professed VOC content, look at the label or ask for the accompanying material safety data sheet.

Worse, because of EPA rules that lack both precision and teeth, even paint that is labeled "no VOC" may contain VOCs, since paint makers often disclose only the required "nonexempt" VOCs that form smog. Many paints also contain undisclosed preservatives called biocides—literally, "life killers"—that pose hazards for chemically sensitive people and undeveloped fetuses. Finally, adding standard pigments to the paint base to mix and match colors will add more VOCs—typically, the deeper the hue, the higher the VOCs. So even if you start with a low-VOC base, it

might be high by the time it comes off the paint shaker.

While current labeling rules leave much to be desired, the EPA is unlikely to address the issue anytime soon. The budget-strapped agency lost its funding for low-VOC research about a decade ago, according to EPA scientist John Chang, who directed the research and whose findings finally were published by the agency in 2001. "Certain paints marketed as 'low VOC' may still emit significant quantities of air pollutants," he concluded.

Although federal oversight lags, green groups offer some guidance. The nonprofit environmental organization Green Seal has a broader definition of VOCs and its own idea of "low": 50 grams per liter for paints with a flat, or matte, finish, and 150 grams per liter for other paints. But again, that's an environmental standard, not a health standard.

Los Angeles-based environmental consultant Mary Cordaro is encouraged to see the introduction of many low- and no-VOC paints and finishes, but she's concerned that some labels offer consumers false comfort. She suggests that anyone who is uncertain about a paint's VOC content treat it as a toxic substance. Ventilate the room by opening windows and using

fans to exchange air—"suck and blow." And have pregnant women stay out of the room for two weeks.

The best paints are those made from natural materials, Cordaro says. Her favorites are Keim, Aglaia, and BioShield. But she also cites AFM, ChemSafe, and Best Paint as good choices for those seeking a truly low- or no-VOC paint. Some of these paints must be ordered and shipped because they aren't widely available in stores, and they all cost more than conventional paints—sometimes quite a bit more.

Because most paints made by mainstream manufacturers are petroleum-based synthetics, consumers should be aware that they have negative environmental consequences regardless of the VOC content, Cordaro says. Especially now that they are being "marketed to people in a way that completely veils the fact that the raw materials are coming from a place that we don't want them to come from," she says.

Because we use so much paint, in so many different ways, Cordaro is concerned that focusing solely on lower VOC content may soothe our environmental conscience but actually further our reliance on products that are not made from natural, renewable resources.

Cordaro has high standards, to be sure, but she's also realistic enough to know that the cost and time required to get a better paint can be prohibitive for many people.

It's a step in the right direction, Cordaro says, if people recognize that the paint they're using is petroleum-based and they're choosing to support the petroleum industry. "Maybe it will plant a seed in one's brain: When I have a little more time, maybe just for the bedroom I'll buy a plant-based finish even though it costs more. Maybe there's a small room I can start with to promote the companies that are using products made from renewable resources." **U**

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