

Painting with the New Green Paints

by Viji Sashikant

Many factors contribute to making a home “green,” and what they add up to is healthy living in a sustainable environment. One such factor—I would say one of the most important—is indoor air quality (IAQ). The US Green Building Council and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are among the organizations in the forefront with guidelines for improving indoor air quality. While there are a host of elements that contribute to good or bad IAQ, the odors and chemicals emitted by paint are able to be dealt with easily.

Christy Lynn is a young mother, balancing a job, home and a toddler. When they bought a home two years ago, she and her husband repainted most of the rooms, but at that time, she had not heard of low-VOC or zero-VOC “green” paints. “Had I known,” she said, “I would have used zero-VOC paint. I would prefer to go green, and I would even be willing to pay a little more for green products.”

This is a common reaction—most people want to go

green, but their perception is that green products are expensive. We are all on a tight budget and have just been through a year of uncertainty, so it’s only natural to put cost before environmental responsibility.

Homebuyers Janet and Joe had just closed on their first home. As I took leave of them in the parking lot, I asked: “So...when are the movers bringing your stuff?” “In a week,” Janet replied. “We still have to paint the rooms!”

I was not really surprised. They had bought a brand new home and had been able to choose the carpet, kitchen counters and cabinets, but not the wall color. The institutional cream was just not their style, and they were in a hurry to personalize their property.

I knew that Janet was hoping to start a family soon, so I asked: “Are you opting for low-VOC paint?” They had heard of low-VOC paints, but were not quite sure what they were or how expensive they were.

What is VOC? The EPA describes VOCs, or Volatile Organic Compounds, as gases emitted by certain solids or liquids like paints, lacquers, paint strippers, glues and adhesives, to name a few. VOCs have been known to cause eye and respiratory tract irritation, headaches, dizziness, visual disorders and memory impairment. And depending on exposure, these effects may be short-term or long-term. So, VOCs affect indoor air quality adversely and one of the culprits is paint. Studies show that the lower the VOC content, the better the indoor air quality.

The good news is that low-VOC and zero-VOC paints are readily available. The great news is that their prices are comparable to that of regular paints.

Troy Felder, manager of a Sherwin-Williams store in Columbia, pointed out the several varieties of both low-VOC and zero-VOC paints that are available there. He finds an increasing number of customers are asking for them—typically those with small children or those expecting a baby. He



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has also noticed that the company is now marketing to the “do-it-right” college-educated consumer who has researched different products.

And how do these green paints compare with regular paint in terms of price?

“We have at least one green product on sale at any given time,” said Felder. “Right now, our zero-VOC product is available at \$36.99 per gallon, while our low VOC paint (96 gms/liter) rating) is priced at \$46.99 per gallon.” While many regular wall paints are priced in the \$20 to \$40 per gallon range, the real cost of repainting is labor, not the paint in the can. Living with cleaner and healthier interior air for years afterward can’t be priced.

Sherwin-Williams’ GreenSure™ paints are environmentally friendly, and offer long-term durability and the highest indoor air quality ratings.

So, why doesn’t everyone buy low-VOC or zero-VOC paints? “Scrubability is an important factor in choosing paint,” Felder explained. “Our zero-VOC paints are water based; they are washable, but not scrubable.”



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Lowe’s home improvement stores also carry a line of low-VOC and zero-VOC paints. The sales associate in the paint department was very knowledgeable and willing to take the time to explain the store’s products. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the zero-VOC paint was priced at \$15.48 per gallon as opposed to the premium brand that was priced at \$21.98 per gallon.

FreshAire Choice is Home Depot’s line of green paints. The FreshAire Choice, says the company’s website, is a revolution in paint inspired by the need to improve air quality. It’s the first ever and only tinted paint to contain no VOCs or harsh chemicals that contribute to poor indoor air quality, and has been awarded the Greenguard’s Certification for Children and Schools.

Worldwide, companies manufacturing paint are investing in technology to produce ecologically sound products. One noteworthy company is California-based EcoTrend, which manufactures an odorless paint that does not contain any VOCs, organic solvents or heavy metals. Collagen, its

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main natural ingredient and binding agent, is made from the membranes of chicken eggs. Eggshells are obtained from food processing centers that use egg yolks and egg whites and discard the shells. Eggshells are cleaned, dried and ground into a fine powder before being incorporated into paint. Not only is EcoTrend producing zero-VOC paint, but it is recycling waste from another industry!

“I place indoor air quality as the prime requirement for a healthy home,” said Dr. Ram Kumar, a Columbia pediatrician. “Air inside the home gets recirculated and stale, and aggravates allergies and other conditions, especially in small children.” When he encounters a child with chronic wheezing, coughing and other allergic symptoms, he advises parents to improve indoor air quality through ventilation, proper cleaning of the home and removing any factor that may be a possible cause.

We know that paint is a quick and easy fix for an out-of-style or tired-looking room. In our quest for a green and healthy home, a good starting point could be using paints and other finishes with low or no VOCs to maintain good indoor air quality.

One final thought. Remember lead-based paint? When its harmful effects were documented and made public, legislation soon followed, and lead-based paint was automatically phased out. It’s a safe bet that in the future, zero-VOC paints will become the norm.

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