Editor’s Note: Selecting Sustainable Products
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A Third-party Certification Program and Resources Primer

Third-party certification labels and green building industry resources offer a helpful way to select and specify sustainable products and construction materials. But remember that all labels are not the same, and they do not measure or guarantee a product’s “greenness” in the same way. For example, what’s more important for your project — a product’s recycled content or its ability to be recycled at the end of its useful life? Does it emit harmful chemicals into the environment during its manufacture or while it’s in use? And even after certification, does the product perform to your standards?

Though there isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach to selecting green products, many credible third-party certification systems, organizations, programs and standards can help. Start by looking for a reputable, independent third party that actually tests/audits a product or manufacturer against a rigorous set of objective standards — be it in the manufacturing process, product content, performance or life cycle.

To aid in your search for or verification of sustainable building materials, spend some time familiarizing yourself with your city or state’s local regulations as well as the following certification programs, rating systems and other resources. (Be aware that not all the programs listed certify or rate products.)

ATHENA Environmental Impact Estimator and EcoCalculator, www.athenasmi.org

BEES 4.0 software from the NIST, www.bfrl.nist.gov/oae/software/bees

Cradle-to-Cradle certification, www.c2ccertified.com


Cool Roof Rating Council, www.coolroofs.org

CSI GreenFormat, www.greenformat.com

ENERGY STAR, www.energystar.gov

Forest Stewardship Council, www.fscus.org
Green Book (ED+C’s annual directory of green products and resources), www.EDCmag.com

GREENGUARD Environmental Institute, www.greenguard.org (learn more on pages 55-72).

Green Seal, www.greenseal.org


Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association Environmental Stewardship Program, www.kcma.org


Rate It Green, www.rateitgreen.com


SMaRT Sustainable Product Standard mts.sustainableproducts.com

Sustainable Forestry Initiative, www.sfiprogram.org

WaterSense, www.epa.gov/watersense

As architects, designers and specifiers, you cannot solely rely on these resources or certifications. Each of your projects may have a different set of criteria for products. With each, be cautious of “greenwashing.” Do your homework, and trust your instincts. For example, remember that LEED does not certify products; the rating system certifies buildings, but a product may contribute to certification of a building. And just because a company is a USGBC member or a Greenbuild exhibitor, there is no verified claim that the product is green.

Until next time,
Michelle

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