Paint it green: Buying eco-friendly paints requires some homework

By Charlyne Varkonyi Schaub
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Everyone — from Benjamin Moore’s Aura to The Home Depot’s Freshaire Choice — is advertising their paints as low VOCs or no VOCs. But buying green isn’t that easy. Advertising that appears to be eco-friendly can be deceptive.

Although the can may say the paint is low in volatile organic compounds, some brands inject a hefty dose of these chemicals when the colorant is added at the store. And low or no VOC paints also can contain suspected carcinogenic ingredients.

The only way to know what you are getting is to read labels carefully, ask probing questions and check whether the product has certification from an organization such as Greenguard or Green Seal.

“The important thing to know is there is no definition of low VOC, no definition for green and no definition for performance,” said Rocky Prior, the creator of Mythic, paint that bills itself as the “first and only high-performance paint that has zero VOCs, zero toxins and is
noncarginogenic.” A chemist, he has been in the paint business for 20 years.

“The paint market is very confusing and the big guys don’t want you to be able to sort through all the clutter,” he said.

One way to start sorting through the clutter is to learn the lingo.

Eco-friendly interior latex paints are those described as low- or no-VOC (volatile organic compounds). VOCs are chemicals that help cause the sharp smell of fresh paint. Mostly solvents, they can include formaldehyde, benzene and other compounds linked to ozone depletion. They can cause eye, nose and throat irritation; nausea and headaches; and trigger asthma attacks. Worse, some of the chemicals have been linked to cancer. And off-gassing — the emission of VOCs from paint — can continue even after it has dried.

**Consumer Reports test**

Even the experts at Consumer Reports, the go-to folks for unbiased shopping advice, haven’t done much work on the topic. The March issue was the first time the magazine tracked the VOC count, according to Dan DiClerico, senior editor.

Paints with high scores in the magazine’s tests for low-luster paints include Benjamin Moore Aura ($55 a gallon), True Value Easy Care ($23 a gallon) and Glidden Evermore ($20 a gallon). DiClerico pointed out that Freshaire Choice ($35-$38 a gallon), which has a powder colorant, and Mythic ($35-$42 a gallon) advertise zero VOCs, but they were not included in the tests.

DiClerico suggested looking on the label for a paint that is below 50 grams per liter. (Remember there are almost 4 liters in a gallon and a room can require up to 2 gallons to
cover properly.)

“The VOC count listed is not necessarily the true VOC,” he warned. “VOCs in the colorant are added at the point of purchase. That bumps up the count. We have seen it as high as 150. So you can have a ‘low VOC’ paint around 50 grams per liter that could actually be in the neighborhood of 200 grams.”

Colorants added by retailers are not regulated by anyone, DiClerico said.

**Improved performance**

Eco-friendly paints have been on the market for a decade, but performance reviews were often bad. Colors were dull. Texture was inconsistent. And they didn’t hold up to scuffs and stains. The sheen selection was often limited since it’s easier to have lower VOCs in a low-gloss paint.

But some of the newer paints, such as Benjamin Moore Aura, reportedly are giving better results. Aura, used at this year’s American Red Cross Designers’ Show Houses in Fort Lauderdale and Singer Island, features ColorLock technology partnered with a waterborne colorant system that does not add VOCs.

**Don’t be ‘greenwashed’**

A paint that has low or no VOCs, may contain potential carcinogens. Check the label for warnings.

Paul Novak of the Green Depot in Newark, N.J., and greendepot.com has been selling
green products since 1991. He’s seen a lot of what the industry calls “greenwashing,” or making a product appear eco-friendly that isn’t.

“Look at the ingredients,” he said. “What you don’t want to see is polyvinyl acetate, mineral spirits, acetone and things like that. You don’t want anything that is construed as a petrochemical or formaldehyde.”

But that’s not the whole story either. Even natural oils can be toxic to someone who is very chemically sensitive, he said.

**Certification**

Interested in eco-friendly paint? The best advice is to do your homework first. Here are some sources to get you started:

Green Seal: A nonprofit organization that promotes environmentally safe products. See [greenseal.org](http://greenseal.org) for certified brands or call (202) 872-6400.

Greenguard: The Greenguard Environmental Institute is an industry-independent, nonprofit organization that oversees a green certification program. See [greenguard.org](http://greenguard.org) for certified brands or call (800) 427-9681.

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**Putting them to the test**
We opened the lids on six eco-friendly paints, the kind made with fewer dangerous chemicals, or at least less likely to emit them.

The good news: Some of these paints provide good coverage.

The less-than-perfect news: Some of them still smell.

Our test was not scientific. It consisted of one homeowner opening paint cans in her garage, sniffing the paint and trying it out on canvases. What she found is this:

• It’s worthwhile to get samples from several brands before you invest in paint. Quality varies widely.

• Price isn’t necessarily an indication of quality.

• A paint labeled no-VOC can compare with or exceed the quality of paint labeled low-VOC.

Benjamin Moore’s low-VOC Aura was clearly the best in this test, with great coverage, low drip and only a slight smell. Aura rated third overall for interior eggshell-finish paints in a March “Consumer Reports” test of traditional and eco-friendly paints. Aura is the most expensive of the six paints tested, and it’s an exception: In this case, price did equal quality.

-- By Jessie Milligan, McClatchy Newspapers

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