Ensuring a gallon of fuscia paint is 'green'

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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 appears can be deceptive. Though 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 carcinogens.

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, creator of Mythic, which bills itself as the "first and only high-performance paint that has zero VOCs, zero toxins and is noncarginogenic.

"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.

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are the solvents released into the air as the paint dries, producing that "new-paint smell." Health and environmental experts warn that this off-gassing harms the ozone layer and can cause watering eyes, headaches, dizziness and other maladies. Young children, the elderly and those with asthma are particularly susceptible. The Environmental Protection Agency says some of these chemicals contain known or suspected carcinogens.
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.

"Most of the manufacturers we deal with have introduced or are in the process of introducing a low- or no-VOC line," DiClerico said. "But that's where a lot of the confusion rests. What qualifies as low VOC? There really isn't any standard."

"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."

Colorants added by retailers are not regulated, DiClerico said.

Eco-friendly paints have been on the market for a decade, but performance reviews were often bad. Colors were dull. Texture inconsistent.

But some of the newer paints, such as Benjamin Moore Aura, reportedly are giving better results. Aura, used at the American Red Cross Designers' Show Houses, features a waterborne colorant system that does not add VOCs.

Mythic, which has been advertising a lot lately in shelter magazines, claims to be safe for people, pets and the earth.

Prior emphasized the importance of investigating the ingredients.

"Some of these companies are so small that no one has caught up with the deception in the labeling," he said. "But they will—eventually."

_S. Florida Sun-Sentinel_