

guardian.co.uk

Paint the town green

Eco paints are improving all the time. Katherine Sorrell gives a guide to an inexpensive, ethical way to spruce up your home

Katherine Sorrell
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 10 February 2009 11.09 GMT



EarthBorn: the only UK brand to carry the EU's eco accreditation. Photograph: PR

What's wrong with conventional paints?

Who knew that picking up a paintbrush could have so many pitfalls? Apart from the nausea, dizziness and headaches which can arise if you don't open enough windows while you're merrily creating a feature wall or jazzing up an old cupboard, the long-term effects aren't great either. The constituents of conventional paints may include formaldehyde, heavy metals and nasties known as volatile organic compounds, or VOCs for short. Those VOCs are given out while painting - and for up to five years after your brushes have dried.

The World Health Organisation says that professional decorators are 40% more likely to contract lung cancer, so it's no great leap to wonder whether paint in the home is detrimental to those living there (just ask the people who get allergic reactions). Not to mention the potentially harmful processes involved in the manufacture of paint ... This is, after all, the petrochemical industry, so not only does production involve the use of non-sustainable resources, it's said that producing one litre of paint can result in up to 30 litres of toxic waste.

What is an eco paint?

By 2010, paint manufacturers will be obliged to comply with stringent new EU limits on VOC levels. Some have complied already and are labelling their products as 'environmentally friendly' - but it ain't necessarily so. According to sustainablebuild.co.uk, many of the 'non-toxic' paints from conventional companies "still contain VOC solvents, chemical pigments and fungicides". Equally confusingly, the move towards low-VOC, water-based gloss paints is also controversial, as it means manufacturers have to add even more ingredients, using a more intensive production process, than before.

Even among the producers of 'eco' or 'natural' paint there's no cut and dried definition of what that description means. Some use synthetic, petrochemical-based ingredients,

just in lower amounts; others are made with natural solvents, which still contain VOCs (though rather than emitting noxious gases they tend to smell of the citrus fruits from which they're often derived). Some contain animal products. And some contain titanium dioxide as a whitener, which is a big contributor to environmental problems. Clearly, there are degrees of 'eco', and the only way to decide is to read the label carefully and consider all the claims made by the manufacturers. [Ethical Consumer](#) concludes its buyers' guide to gloss paint with this useful 60-second green guide: 'Generally, plant-based, water-borne paints are the best buy, followed by plant-based, solvent-borne ones with natural solvents. Try to avoid those using titanium dioxide.'

Aren't they a bit of a faff to use?



Edward Bulmer's Pots of Paint. Photograph: PR

Eco paints can be hard to get hold of - they still only account for a minute percentage of the market and so, although they are stocked in green outlets all around the UK, it's probably easiest to buy them online (see below). They're also more expensive than conventional paint, though not horrendously so - especially when you consider that you're paying for natural ingredients and, very often, low-carbon or carbon-neutral production (and the ability to compost any leftover paint - yes, really!).

Using eco paints used to mean fiddling about with mixing powders and base paint, but these days you can buy eco paints ready-mixed, in a wide range of colours, and even have them colour-matched to your desired shade. They can be applied in the same way as ordinary paints, with similar coverage, though paints made with natural oils tend to take longer to dry.

Where can they be used?

Pretty much anywhere that you would use conventional paint. Because they are microporous, they're ideal for walls in older houses, which need to breathe. They're also perfect for children's rooms and toys. They're available in a wide range of finishes: as well as emulsions, interior and exterior eggshells, masonry paints and primers, you can buy hard-wearing, wipeable natural paints for use in kitchens, hallways and so on, or, at the other end of the scale, distempers which are only for low-use, dry areas.

But are they any good?

A Which? report of five years ago came to the conclusion that: "On the whole the 'natural' paints we tested didn't do as well as the others." Unsurprisingly, the manufacturers argue that their products are just as good as conventional paints. Biofa's paint, for example, is used on the Norwegian parliament and Brighton's Jubilee library, while several of Auro's products have been recommended by Oko Test, the stringent German environmental magazine. Ecos claims that its exterior products were tested for six years in varying environments and performed as well as or better than the brand leaders when applied as directed.

Edward Bulmer, an architectural historian, interior designer and green campaigner, has worked with Aglaia to create the Pots of Paint range of natural paints. He says: "I have used natural and traditional paints for a long time, and there is absolutely no problem with longevity and performance as long as they're applied correctly. Our emulsions perform every bit as well as synthetic paints, if not better, because the pigment-loading in them will be higher so they won't fade. And the performance of our natural oil paint will easily outstrip that of a synthetic coating because it actually impregnates the surface of the timber and bonds really well with it."

Five of the best

Aglaia

Manufactured in Germany since 1968 using only natural ingredients. Products for indoor walls, timber and metal with colours you can mix yourself, or choose from the pre-mixed historical, coastal or contemporary ranges. Also produces Edward Bulmer's Pots of Paint collection.

For stockists go to aglaiapaint.co.uk

Auro

Petrochemical-free paints made using natural raw materials from environmentally managed sources and produced using a sustainable ecological cycle. Its gloss paint is Ethical Consumer's best buy.

Tel 01452 772020; auro.co.uk

Biofa

Wall emulsions and gloss paints, stains, varnishes and cleaners, made from sustainable, natural raw materials.

Tel 01273 808370; biofa.co.uk

earthBorn

Paints for timber, and interior and exterior walls. Water-based and free of petrochemicals, they are the only UK brand to carry the EU eco-label flower accreditation. Stylish shades include designer Oliver Health's Eco Chic range.

Tel 01928 734171; earthbornpaints.co.uk

Ecos

Totally VOC- and solvent-free paints for interior and exterior walls, woodwork and floors. Has the British Allergy Foundation's seal of approval. Available in 108 colours,

plus a colour-matching service.

Tel 01524 852371; ecopaints.com

• *What is your experience of using eco paints? Can they rival conventional brands, or do they deliver disappointing results? Have your say in the comments section below*

Ads by Google

Eco Products

The ideal place for natural, organic products and gifts

shop.wwf.org.uk/

Eco Wedding Rings

Treading Lightly on the Earth - A Natural for Green Weddings

www.greenKarat.com

earthBorn Paints

Environmentally friendly paints Stylish colours and VOC free

www.earthbornpaints.co.uk

Comments

In order to see comments, please turn JavaScript on in your browser.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2009