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Keeping Green, Cleaning Green

Finding truth in green labeling

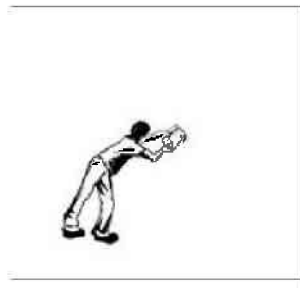
By Tara Leitner

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Green used to be just a color, but now it's used to describe something good for you, the consumer; easier on the earth; safe for our furry friends. More of a marketing phenomenon than a definition-bound term, being green means something different to everyone, and cleaning products are no exception.

But behind all the lingo, there are facts, pointers and labeling programs that can help you make informed choices about cleaning products. A representative from the Consumer Specialty Products Association (CSPA), which represents more than 200 companies that work with "consumer products that help household and institutional customers create cleaner and healthier environments," says walking a greener path is nothing new for many companies.

"A lot of companies are coming out with green-type product lines, but you look at some of these traditional cleaning companies, and they've been doing that for years," says Gretchen Schaefer, the CSPA's vice president of communications.



Regulation

When it comes to the world of green, the market is largely unregulated. Labels like natural, non-toxic, eco-friendly, earth-friendly – even green itself – are not regulated terms.

Products proffering such titles may contain oil, ingredients that can cause allergic reactions and chemicals with toxic implications. Only active disinfectants must be listed on cleaning product ingredient labels, meaning bottles and packaging don't always offer the full story. However, some companies do offer full ingredient disclosure, including, according to its Web site, Seventh Generation.

"Consumers are becoming more interested in reading product labels, and our industry is becoming much more open to disclosing those ingredients," says Schaefer.

Green Terms – Labels Do Matter

Labels and certifications are beginning to pop up on the green cleaning market. Here's an explanation of some you may find:

- **EcoLogo:** Products with this label do not contain alkylphenol exothylates or glycol ethers, cancer-causing chemicals or those that can damage the reproductive system, or ozone-depleting ingredients. (www.ecologo.org)

- **Green Seal:** These products leave out cancer-causing chemicals, and ingredients that can damage the reproductive system, irritate the skin or eyes and the environment. They must follow phosphate restrictions and their packaging contains recycled materials and can be recycled. (www.greenseal.org)

- **Design for the Environment:** The Environmental Protection

SUSTAINABILITY ISSUE 2010

- Michael Perry, Words of Wisdom
- Strange Bedfellows
- Door County Sustainability Fair, 2010
- **By the Numbers**
By The Numbers
- How Does Your Garden Grow?
- On Sustainability
- "Earth Week" Events
- Re-purposing Buildings:
Patricia Shoppe
- Re-purposing Buildings:
Isaksen Architects Office,
Sturgeon Bay

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For example, detergents cannot contain polyphenol ethoxylates. (www.epa.gov/ncr)

- The GreenGuard Environmental Institute: This organization tests and certifies products meeting certain low-chemical and particle-emissions levels for their use indoors. Its labeling can be found on finishes, furnishings, cleaning products and more. (www.greenguard.org)
- USDA Certified Organic Seal: According to the United States Department of Agriculture, its organic system is designed to "foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity." (www.ams.usda.gov)

While these certifications are not all encompassing (keep in mind even the greenest-seeming products can contain a skin irritant, etc.), they each offer unique regulations and restrictions. The following are from commonly-used product categories carrying a certification aiming for heightened environmental or human safety.

All-purpose Cleaners

Greenology offers both consumer and commercial product lines that include USDA-organic certified cleaners. Its products also are said to be biodegradable and use recycled packaging. The products, which are available at many Lowe's locations, include the All-Purpose Cleaner Degreaser, designed to kill odor-causing bacteria and prevent its growth.

Laundry Detergent

Dial Corporation's Ultra Purex Natural Elements laundry detergents are said to be hypoallergenic and free of dyes and carry the EPA's Design for the Environment label.

Dish Soap

Oxi Brite Inc.'s Greener Choice line has EcoLogo-certified products, including its Ultra Dishwashing Liquid. The product has no phosphates (pollutant to bodies of water and the life within them) and is made with biodegradable ingredients. It is also packaged in 100-percent post-consumer plastic bottles.

Bathroom Cleaner

Simple Green has products certified with the Green Seal, including its Simple Green Naturals Bathroom Cleaner designed to clean waterborne minerals and soap scum. Reduced toxicity, biodegradability and packaging are among the assessed characteristics that earned the product Green Seal certification.

Floor Cleaner

BonaKemi offers several floor cleaning formulas that carry GreenGuard for Indoor Air Quality certification and are Children and Schools Certified. The products are certified to have low VOC and formaldehyde levels and include hardwood, stone, tile and laminate and commercial hard surface cleaners.

Making Good Choices

Sorting through the malay of the green cleaning products market might seem daunting, but it consists of "basic steps and common sense, like opening a window," says Henning Bloech, executive director of the GreenGuard Environmental Institute. "A strong odor [in a cleaning product] is a warning sign." Look for more tips on the GreenGuard Web site, under Consumers. (www.greenguard.org/consumers/consumers_tips.aspx)

Make the decision process easier with these simple steps:

1. What does green mean to you?

Are you looking for products that are better for the earth? The air? Safer for human use?

2. Are the products you already use in line with your definition of green?

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3. What brands work well for you?

Keep your research in mind and hit the stores. Know which labels or certifications to look for.

The Basic Ingredients

If you prefer to skip checking labels and go the homemade route, the following products, which may already be in your pantry, can help keep your household or business clean.

- Baking soda has long been used to clean, get rid of odors and scrub surfaces.
- Unscented soap comes in multiple forms (liquid, flakes, powders, bars) and is biodegradable.
- Lemon not only leaves a fresh scent, its acid can be effective against bacteria.
- Borax, or sodium borate, is a disinfectant, deodorizer and has infinite uses around the house.
- White Vinegar is inexpensive and can remove mildew, grease and other hard-to-cut-through substances. It can also remove some stains.
- Isopropyl Alcohol disinfects.
- Cornstarch can de-grime surfaces and clean carpet.

Ingredients to Avoid

Knowing a few red-flag ingredients also can be helpful in making more sustainable cleaning choices. Beware products containing petroleum distillates (such as benzene or 1,4 dioxane), which come from oil, a non-renewable resource. Both ingredients also have been linked to some forms of cancer and other human health issues. Other less-than-desirable ingredients, listed on www.eartheasy.com, include:

- Phosphates
- Nonylphenol ethoxylates
- Phthalates
- Volatile organic compounds (VOCs)
- Ammonia
- Chlorine

For more information on ingredients to avoid visit: <http://www.eartheasy.com/blog/2009/01/how-safe-are-green-cleaning-products/>

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