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Green by Design

Deck out your home with these eco-friendly choices

by Cindy Klinger

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Photo courtesy of IceStone

Green is everywhere—in the supermarket, on the newsstands, in the movies and even in celebrity culture. If you're like many Americans, you're hopping on the bandwagon to save the planet and improve your health by buying some organic produce, switching out a light bulb and filling up your recycling bins. The green revolution is no longer a trend; it's a way of life—and it's here to stay. It can also be a part of your home. Interior design has come full circle, reuniting with the environment, and the results are exquisite. Here's what you need to know to green up your home with an eco-friendly designer's eye.

Reduce, recycle, reuse

Every time you recover an old, tattered chair or buy a 20th-century coffee table from a consignment shop, you're helping prevent something being created to take its place. Updating a more mature piece also helps build an eclectic look in any type of home. Buying locally produced products is another way to help the environment; reducing the travel time also decreases fumes emitted into the air, whether it's from a plane or truck ride.

Verde Home, a new "green" furniture showroom in West Midtown, carries several creatively made items that are exotic and easy on the earth. For example, urban wood taken from an Atlanta home that was being torn down is now a gorgeous coffee table. **Verde** Home also offers "upcycled" items, says co-owner Paul Baird, or discarded items found from all over the world that are transformed into something new and improved. In his showroom, an old butter churn and part of a wooden wheel are now art, and some of his functional pieces, like lamps, were once trash.

Sustainable, striking designs

If you think eco-design means bland colors and scratchy materials, you'll be pleasantly surprised to discover the myriad of options that abound, ranging in the "green" spectrum from a tinge of olive to a bright pea green. "I would say not to be intimidated. Green is not just about building tree houses," says Karen Raymer, who owns Waldenour EcoDesign studio in West Midtown, with her husband Brad. Here are some tips on how to get started.

Furniture

- Wicker and bamboo are popular environmentally friendly materials, since some wicker is made from sustainable, rattan vines, and bamboo is a renewable source. The wicker at Waldenour EcoDesign is harvested and manufactured in a fair trade village in the Philippines.
- Reclaimed woods also are a good choice, because you're essentially recycling wood that's been used in another format. When it's shined and put to use in a new piece of furniture, you'd never know it's recycled—unless, of course, you're going for the weathered look.
- Eco-friendly fabrics covering your couch, chair or headboard include hemp, cotton chenille and organic silks. You probably don't know what's hidden underneath the upholstery, either, but at Waldenour EcoDesign, you can feel the difference between organic and traditional cotton, wool and rubber. Organic wool is a natural dust-mite repellent, flame retardant and temperature regulator, while natural rubber offers unequalled moisture control in addition to also having dust-mite repellent and antibacterial properties, Raymer says.
- Even the stains, finishes and glue to secure frames are researched for the lowest impact on you and the environment. Look for Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified furniture, which certifies sustainable forest products. The options for organic furniture are endless, with tons of custom options available.

Rugs

- Traditional carpeting and rugs contribute to much of the off-gassing in a home. **Verde** Home specializes in rugs from Nepal, which use Swiss dyes and take extreme care not to release them back into the local riverbed. Look for rugs made with low-impact dyes. "It's really about the amount of heavy metals that are in the dyes," Baird says. "So there's a very low content of that."
- Vegetable-dyed rugs may sound green, but if byproducts are being released into the local water stream, they're not exactly eco-friendly. High-end wool rugs, particularly hand-woven ones, are inherently pretty natural.

Cabinetry and countertops

- When researching environmentally friendly cabinets, look for FSC-certified lines, sustainable harvested poplar wood, local manufacturing and nontoxic stains and finishes, Raymer says. Glues and stains in traditional cabinets can off-gas.
- When it comes to countertops, there are several eco-friendly options, including paper (Richlite) or IceStone, a composite material composed of concrete with glass chips set inside. The ceramic cement countertops Waldenour EcoDesign sells are made from 70 to 80 percent recycled products like glass and fly ash (a byproduct of coal-burning plants), and are blended with a proprietary blend of ceramic cement to create striking countertops as well as vessel sinks ideal for the bathroom. “The production of Portland cement (not eco-friendly) accounts for seven percent of all carbon dioxide emissions from human resources,” Raymer says. “To achieve high strengths and design qualities, additional products such as water reducers, plasticizers and acrylics are often used.” The eco-friendly version is mold-resistant, scratch- and chip-resistant, freeze- and thaw-cycle resistant, and is also resistant to most food stains and heat.
- Quartz countertops, made from crushed quartz and a combination of polymer, colors and binders, are another great option, and come in a multitude of colors.



Photos courtesy of (Left to right clockwise), (First two) Waldenour EcoDesign, el environmental language, Verde Home, Weyerhaeuser, IceStone, Durapalm and Crystal Cabinet Works Inc.

Fabrics

- For your drapery, upholstery and bedding, organic cotton, canvas, hemp, bamboo and wool are excellent materials. Look for water-based or vegetable dyes made without finishing agents.

Wall coverings

- Wallpaper can be harmful, with its finishing agents and various chemical dyes. If you purchase wallpaper without a toxic vinyl finish, says Raymer, you're making a more mindful choice.
- Environmentally friendly wall finishes, an alternative to traditional paint or plaster, can offer texture to a wall without many toxins. These are water-based and mixed with natural pigments.

- When it comes to paints, there are lots of options, from milk-based paints to low- or no-VOC paint. Mainstream brands like Benjamin Moore and Sherwin-Williams carry low- and no-VOC paints.

Flooring

- Sustainable flooring includes pre-finished MOSO bamboo, pre-finished engineered South American tropical hardwoods, pre-finished engineered North American rustic-grade flooring, and pre-finished engineered North American hardwoods. Again, look for FSC-certified woods that are VOC-free and have non-formaldehyde adhesives.

Accessories and artwork

- If you're like most people, you've probably never thought about what kinds of toxic materials were used in the attractive artwork hanging on your walls. But paints and lacquers can off-gas for their entire lives, releasing those fumes into your home. Nontoxic artwork does exist, which means milk-based paints, beeswax and other earth- and people-friendly products were used to combine beauty with mindfulness.

- Sometimes you can seal in the harmful chemicals used in traditional pieces so you aren't breathing in toxins. You can also purchase recycled-glass tableware that can unite art with function.

As you can see, there are eco-friendly options for any part of your decor. So next time you're shopping for your home, shop for the earth as well!