

Save the world — start at home



Eco-friendly interior: Home furnishings made of bamboo and other natural materials have become popular.

By Brandi Schlossberg

You may think of your sofa stuffing and toilet bowl as mundane — or you may not think of them at all. These simple home fixtures, however, can affect your health, your pocketbook and the planet. It's no wonder the field of sustainable design has skyrocketed in recent years.

"It's a dollar thing first of all," said Kimberly Phipps-Nichol, owner of Blue Water Studio in Reno and an accredited professional of the U.S. Green Building Council Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED). "When it comes to products that use energy or water — light fixtures, appliances, plumbing — they do pay for themselves."

If you're in the market for new appliances, look first for the Energy Star label. It means an appliance has either met or exceeded the EPA's Energy Star standards and is far more efficient than older models. A list of every Energy Star product, including exact levels of efficiency, can be found online at www.energystar.gov.

The Energy Star rating not only applies to big-ticket items such as refrigerators and washing machines, but also to phones, ceiling fans, TV sets, light fixtures and much more.

When it comes to lighting, one inexpensive way to go green is by replacing incandescent bulbs with fluorescent ones.

"Eventually incandescents are going to go away," Phipps-Nichol said. "Granted, fluorescent lights don't have the same color, but there are better bulbs coming out every day.

"These bulbs absolutely pay for themselves," she added, "and the price has come down so much it would be difficult not to use them."

In the bathroom, invest in a dual-flush toilet. With a separate flush for liquid and solid, far less water is wasted.

Mindful details

Aside from plumbing and appliances, the sustainable home is built on mindful details, from the paint on the walls and the cabinets in the kitchen to the floors and the sofa.

"Typically, wood-based furniture is treated, stained and sealed in a way that's not always good for the environment or for your health," Phipps-Nichol said. "Also, the fillers and foams in most furniture contain petroleum."

Fortunately, green furniture companies have cropped up to meet the demand for healthy design. They employ nontoxic wood treatment, organic textiles, and padding and fillers without petroleum.

"What I encourage people to do before they buy new is to consider reuse," Phipps-Nichol said. "Most toxins within a finishing method or foam have done their off-gassing within 36 months, so if it's done its thing polluting the air, think about recovering it with the natural fillings and organic textiles."

For that floor beneath the furniture, choose renewable resources such as bamboo, cork, stone and recycled-glass tiles. On the walls, pick VOC-free paints or milk paints that won't emit chemicals.

"Once paint with Volatile Organic Compounds goes on the wall, the chemicals in the paint react to the oxygen in the air and come into your environment," Phipps-Nichol said. "If you want to be super green, go for the milk paints — it's the protein in the milk that causes the paint to stick, and it's a method that's been around for centuries."

Healthy people, healthy planet

At the Gerber Medical Clinic in Reno, where many patients suffer from Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Syndrome, it's important that the building's interior be clean and green.

"Minimizing toxic exposure from chemicals in building materials impacts not only ultra-sensitive


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patients, but also our staff in maintaining high levels of focus, concentration, energy and good health,” said Dr. Michael Gerber.

Gerber also chose to be good to the environment when he remodeled the 45-year-old building where his clinic is located. Among an array of green highlights, the clinic comprises floors made from natural Marmoleum — a combination of linseed oil from flax, wood flours, rosins, limestone, pigments and jute — installed with eco-friendly adhesives.

This is but a small sampling of the options available to give a building’s interior a healthy dose of green. The ever-increasing variety of price points, products and styles is a reflection of the growing desire to live a sustainable life.

“If you can benefit your budget, your health and the planet all in one shot,” Phipps-Nichol said, “why not?” 

TAKE A GREEN TOUR TODAY

Gerber Medical Clinic is hosting an Earth Day celebration today, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. The event includes tours of the facility, wellness lectures, videos, music and food. Kimberly Phipps-Nichol, a LEED-accredited interior designer, will speak at the clinic from 4 to 5 p.m. Gerber Medical Clinic is located close to Idlewild Park, at 1225 Westfield Ave., Suite 2.