



Color your world—and still make it green.

So you want to add color to the living room walls? You've probably heard the bad news: Fresh-paint smell may be an odiferous bad omen. Common interior paint contains a host of suspect ingredients, including sometimes-smelly volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as benzene, formaldehyde, and petrochemicals. These VOCs and other paint chemicals are under scrutiny for causing everything from temporary respiratory irritations to chronic illnesses. Not a pretty picture.

Thanks to increasing customer demand, though, manufacturers are developing better paint that provides excellent durability and coverage. In addition, old-fashioned options can satisfy thoroughly modern environmental sensibilities.

All paint must have a Materials Safety Data Sheet (MSDS), which lists known hazards and precautions. You'll have to ask for it or get it online, then decipher chemical names such as dimethyloldimethylhydantoin (that's formaldehyde to you and me). Green Seal, an independent nonprofit, has established stringent standards for environmentally friendly paints, and those that meet the criteria can be certified as such. Look for the Green Seal logo or check with an eco-retailer, a green architect, or an eco-savvy contractor for reputed brands. To avoid chemical sensitivities, stay away from biocides, mildewcides, preservatives, additives, and other magical boosters.

Milk paint

You can't drink it, but true milk paint (also called casein paint) is incredibly safe. Made from milk protein (casein), pigments, lime, clay, and water added on site by the homeowner, it's practically VOC free; has a mild, nontoxic odor; doesn't chip or peel; and is safe for use even on children's toys. Plus, there's little waste because you mix it as needed.

Milk-based paint is a terrific option if your walls are unfinished, porous, or made from plaster, wood, or earth. If the surface is nonporous, you may need to do some prep work—such as applying special bonding agents or sanding—to prepare your walls for milk paint; check with the manufacturer or retailer.

Low-VOC, zero-VOC, or low-odor paint

Almost every major paint brand now has a low-VOC line, identified in accordance with EPA guidelines for interior architectural coatings. The non-glossy latex variety should outgas less than 250 grams of VOCs per liter (g/l), and the oil-based type less than 380 g/l. Paint advertised as "zero VOC" or "no VOC" may have extremely low VOC measurements in independent testing, but the EPA hasn't yet established limits. Some environmental building programs believe EPA regulations aren't rigorous enough about protecting human health; they encourage using paints that produce less than 150 g/l of VOCs.

"Low VOC" and "low odor" are sometimes used interchangeably, but they're not equivalent. Some low-VOC paints are undistinguishable in smell from higher VOC paint. For example, the paint ingredient acetic acid, which is basically vinegar, has a strong aroma. Conversely, just because paint is advertised as low odor, it's not necessarily low VOC.

So what should you look for? In general, the solvents in traditional oil-based paints are bigger VOC and chemical-sensitivity offenders. Latex paint, with a water base, is a better choice. Go for the lowest possible VOC rating that will do the



Tolu offers a wide variety of all-natural paints.

job. As for odor level, the nose knows; do a spot test for smelliness, both wet and dry.

Natural paints

Typical paint manufacturers may use thousands of engineered chemical compounds. Natural or organically derived paints, on the other hand, tout food-safe, natural ingredients from plants and minerals—essential oils, tree resins, beeswax, and mineral pigments—and steer away from PVA, polys, vinyls, plastics, and petrochemicals. From the manufacturing process to the landfill, the natural materials are gentler on the environment.

Some of these natural paints are water based and clean up in the sink; others are oil based. Either way, paint made from organic ingredients will probably have a shorter shelf life than the traditional kind.

GET THE LEAD OUT

Although lead-based paint was banned from U.S. markets in 1978, older homes may still have it. Before painting or prep-work on old surfaces, consult with your local health department for lead testing. Never scrape or sand to remove it; lead might be present, even in microscopic amounts, and it can be highly toxic. To learn about the hazards of lead paint:

- EPA.gov/lead/leadinfo.htm
- CFSC.gov/CFSCinfo/pubs/5055.html
- National Lead Information Center: (800) 424-3333

IS RECYCLED PAINT BETTER?

A few manufacturers and local recycling initiatives sell or give away latex paint that's a blend from reclaimed, partially used, or unused cans. The paint is unlikely to be low-VOC because it comes from a variety of sources, so indoor use might not be the best application. Recycled paint is a great landfill saver, though, and might be the right shade of gray for the garage or shed.

PAINT-PERFECT TIPS

- Choose the right paint for the surface, especially where there's high humidity (bathrooms, kitchens, or laundry areas).
- If you choose traditional paint, buy top-quality brands, which have more solids. You'll need fewer coats and reapplications—all good things for the environment.
- Prep well. No paint adheres well to moisture, dirt, chips, or flakes. Never sand without proper ventilation and a mask.
- Primer may reduce the coats needed and will cover many imperfections—look for low-odor, low-VOC types.
- If the paint is pre-mixed, don't add water or thinner, which will alter the product integrity and VOC level.
- Applying paint on a fair-weather day can improve drying time, bonding, and long-term stability.
- Always ventilate the area well until paint is dry and odor free.