



Ecoholic

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Are all low-VOC paints pretty much the same?

The number of times you hear "VOC" bandied about these days, you'd think the phrase had been coined by some new wave Naughty by Nature rap star. ("You down with V.O.C.? Yeah, you know me!")

My own green rap would slam VOCs, volatile organic compounds, for polluting the air, sneaking carcinogens and neurotoxins like benzene, formaldehyde, kerosene, ammonia and toluene into our breathing zones. Okay, so it wouldn't be as catchy, but it would be damn educational.

Why are VOCs in paint anyway? Well, volatile organic compounds traditionally helped make paints spreadable and dry the way we like them. All fine and dandy until we realized that laying down a coat of paint can make the air quality in your home up to 1,000 times worse than that of outdoor air, and that these particularly naughty chems can continue to off-gas from your walls for weeks or months.

As you can tell from the smell, oil paints are much worse than water-based latex paints when it comes to air-polluting and headache-inducing VOCs. Still, acrylic-based latex paints contain up to 10 per cent VOCs.

No wonder, then, that the trendiest paints hitting stores these days are the low-VOC kind.

Question is, are they all the same? The short answer: no. So far no official government standards regulate the use of the term, although Canada is now developing some. It looks like the VOCs in flat paint will be capped at 100 grams per litre, with high-gloss paint capped at 250. That's certainly better than the 10-year-old U.S. standard that allows 250 grams per litre in flat paints and 380 for others. (New standards are expected by 2011.) But neither reg is all that impressive.

The U.S.'s Green Seal logo and Canada's own EcoLogo are a lot stricter. Both certification bodies require less than 50 grams of VOCs per litre for flat paints and less than 150 for non-flat paints. Plus, paints have to be free of "carcinogens, mutagens, reproductive toxins, hazardous air pollutants or ozone-depleting compounds."

Trouble is, all of the above standards apply only to the base, not to the colour. The VOC spike happens when you add pigment to a low-VOC base. The darker and glossier the colour, the more air polluters.

Of the big brands, only Benjamin Moore claims to have a special colour lock system

that doesn't add VOCs to its low-VOC Aura line or its zero-VOC Natura line. (Both carry the Green Seal logo.)

But good news for eco painters is coming down the pipe. Green Seal will finally cap VOC levels in both base paint and colourants by 2010. That means once the colour is added, VOCs will max out at 100 mg/litre for flat paint and 150 for non-flat.

And since VOC testing has been such a sloppy process (which is partly why many low- and zero-VOC brands get away with higher readings), Greenseal's new testing should help ensure that VOCs stay as close to zero as possible.

By the way, conscientious Portland-based paint-maker Yolo Colorhouse already meets the new Green Seal standards (yolocolorhouse.com). It's available at specialty green shops across Canada like the Zero Point on Queen East (thezeropoint.ca).

One more thing to keep in mind: low-VOC means, at best, just that – low in volatile organic compounds. It doesn't mean a paint is all-natural or free of harsh chemicals.

If you want to get back to nature, you can find totally natural paints made with mineral pigments and plant- and earth-based ingredients, like the stunning American Clay plaster collections and plant-based Green Planet Paints, also available at Zero Point.

Farrow and Ball's paints aren't entirely natural, but they do contain natural ingredients like China clay, linseed oil and lime putty, and as of August they're all zero VOC (even the tinted ones)

Also, Homestead House on Niagara has all-natural milk paint (homesteadhouse.ca). They'll cost you more, but they'll definitely keep you and your walls breathing easy.