

# Doing a number on colors

## House paint can be gentle on your lungs and your wallet

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for Pamplin Media Group

Ah, summer. The fresh scent of cut grass. The tangy aroma of sunscreen. The, um, odor of paint drying.

Let's face it: We paint our homes in the summer, when the weather is nice, the windows are open and a new coat of paint dries and cures most efficiently. But the smell of paint is not something most of us like to live with. In fact, it can be downright harmful.

"There are plenty of chemicals that should not be in paint, like toluene," says Rich MacMain, who works with a residential green-building program in Austin, Texas. "These chemicals are good for pigment, for drying, etc. But they're just like all those harmful hidden chemicals in cigarettes."

Chief among the smelly chemical culprits are volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. They turn up in paint as solvents, evaporating quickly into the air as the paint dries and then linger for days, sometimes weeks. Short-term, they can cause headaches, dizziness, nausea and respiratory

distress. Long-term, they can cause cancer and damage the heart, liver, kidneys and central nervous system.

Once they enter the atmosphere, they create ozone down at ground level (better known as smog) and deplete ozone up in the stratosphere. They're not the kind of thing you want hanging around, especially if you have kids or elderly people at home.

All conventional latex paints — even latex paints, which use water as their primary solvent — contain VOCs. Oil-based paints also require paint thinner, itself full of VOCs, for cleaning up spills and brushes. But since 1999, when the Environmental Protection Agency issued national regulations restricting VOCs,

more and more paints (mostly latex-based) have appeared on the market announcing their low- or zero-VOC status. The products come from local companies as well as national brands.

"The whole industry is going toward no-VOC paint," says Janie Lowe, one of the two co-creators

of Yolo Colorhouse, a Portland-based paint company that sells only VOC-free paint. Her partner, Virginia Young, agrees. "People think we're selling an organic paint," she says. "No, we're not. But what we're selling is a better option, especially now that houses are built so tight that the air doesn't circulate."

Lowe and Young did custom interiors before starting Yolo Colorhouse, with its rich-but-muted palette of coordinating colors. In February 2003, Friends since they met in New York City more than a dozen years ago, they complete each other's sentences without hesitation.

"About five years ago, we tried to cut out all oil paints and use just latex," Young says.

"Thinking we were doing good, you know," Lowe adds.

"But we were feeling affected even by the latex," Young says. "So we looked at clay, lime, plaster, milk paints. But five years ago, the technology wasn't there."

"The coverage was bad — it was thin and runny," Lowe says.

"Because of that, painters today are still very suspicious of 'natural' paints," Young says.

"But the technology is there now, with the binders," Lowe says.

"The molecular structure," Young finishes.

Yolo's paint — currently interior paint only, although Lowe and Young plan to launch an exterior paint line in spring 2007 — is manufactured for them by local company Rodda Paint. It's available in Rodda stores and what Young calls "green stores," or independent paint stores with an environmental slant. On average, the Yolo line costs about \$37 per gallon.

"Color attracts people," Young says. "And the price is pretty competitive with other premium paints. So it's kind of a no-brainer, especially if you have kids."

### Labels don't reveal all

Young and Lowe both say that trying to discern what paints really contain can be tricky. "It's pret-

## Vital stats

■ Total U.S. paint-industry shipments in 2004, in gallons: 1,264 billion

■ Value of total U.S. paint-industry shipments in 2004: \$10.5 billion

■ Portion of these 2004 sales accounted for by house paints: 44 percent

■ Number of gallons of paint required to coat a 2,085-square-foot house: 58

Sources: National Paint & Coatings Association, National Association of Home Builders



Virginia Young (left) and Janie Lowe met a dozen years ago in New York City and now own Yolo Colorhouse, a Southeast Portland business that sells Earth-friendly paint.

ty confusing for the customer," Young says. "I think it's reasonable to ask to open the paint to the store, to smell it, but some paints have masking agents, to hide the smell of chemicals."

David Schaleger, Metro Paint's latex operations technician, agrees, saying that labels don't tell the whole story. "The EPA sets the limit for VOCs in paint," he says. "Basically, a latex paint is not supposed to exceed 250 grams (of VOCs) per liter. But pigment can add anywhere from 10 to 60 units of VOC, putting that paint well over the 250 limit."

Run by the tri-county government, Metro Paint is essentially a recycling operation, mixing together batches of used latex paints dropped off for reuse. "We spit out up to 150,000 gallons a year," Schaleger says. "The paint comes in 15 basic colors, from white to light blue to brown, and can be applied to both interiors and exteriors. Sizes are limited to 1 gallon and 5 gallons, and prices range from \$5 to \$29 per gal."

"Not containing any raw materials is what makes Metro Paint environmental," Schaleger says. "Periodically, we do VOC testing on the paint. It's always well within regulations; the lowest we had was down in the 30s and 40s."

### Another entrepreneur bites

Like Lowe and Young, who were concerned about their own health as well as that of their customers and the environment

## Safer paints

To meet EPA standards, "low-VOC" interior and exterior latex paints must have less than 250 grams of VOCs per liter; "zero-VOC" paints must have 5 grams per liter or less.

Paints certified by Green Seal ([www.greenseal.org](http://www.greenseal.org)), an independent nonprofit, must have less than 150 grams per liter for interior paints and 200 grams per liter for exterior paints.

Local companies offering lower-VOC paint options include YOLO Colorhouse ([www.yolocolorhouse.com](http://www.yolocolorhouse.com)), Metro Paint ([www.metro-region.org/paint](http://www.metro-region.org/paint)) and Paintegrity ([paintegrity.tropod.com](http://paintegrity.tropod.com)).

Oregon-based Rodda Paint ([www.roddapaint.com](http://www.roddapaint.com)) and Miller Paint ([www.millerpaint.com](http://www.millerpaint.com)) both sell Green Seal-certified house paints.

National brands with Green Seal-certified paints include Benjamin Moore, Dutch Boy, Olympic and Sherwin-Williams.

Natural paints, such as milk paints and whitewashes, are the safest for your health and the environment. They may, however, contain naturally occurring VOCs such as turpentine.

when they started Yolo, Jeremy Girard got into the painting business on the principle that it needed to be done safely. He started his company, Forest Grove-based Paintegrity, in May, and hopes to eventually open several paint stores.

"Our goal is to be able to supply homeowners and contractors with enviro-safe paint products, deck stains, wood finishes — a complete line of products. There's a real need for that," Girard says. His suppliers include two Oregon companies (Miller and Ames) and a European one (Auro), providing Paintegrity with no-VOC paint as well as natural paint. Prices start at \$20 a gallon.

"We're doing our best to be kind to the Earth," Girard says.

"We like to wash our brushes with water in a yard, instead of putting it right down the drain into the water system. We put it into the Earth and let the Earth kind of do its part in filtering what's there. And we don't clean everything out of our buckets — we let the paint dry, then peel it out and throw it away."

Schaleger applauds the shift in the paint industry toward better products and practices, but admits that perfection is probably an impossible goal. "Ultimately, we want a product that releases nothing into the environment, either during the manufacture or the painting itself, and still works like paint, and lasts forever," he says. "That may be too tough a demand to make."



Yolo Colorhouse's paint is manufactured for it by local company Rodda Paint.

PHOTOS BY CAROLINE CUMMINS