

Seven ways to make a beautiful impact on your own environment

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Like Dorothy in the Emerald City, you're probably feeling a little dazed by how many home design products are going "green."

And, even if your heart is in the right place and you have the courage to try some eco-friendly designs, you might wish you had a little more brainpower to follow the best path toward sustainable home design.

"Green design is really a moving target right now," says Cate Leger, principal of Leger Wanaselja Architecture in Berkeley. "There are always new discoveries coming up and it can be difficult to keep on top of developments if you're not a professional."

Nevertheless, as the green revolution moves out of its infancy and into a more settled science, here are seven sure bets for beautifying both your home and the whole Earth.

Less is more

Leger says the best thing you can do when designing a new home is to keep it as small as you can. Noting that you'll use less resources to build, heat and furnish a smaller home, Leger says, "It doesn't cost more to come up with a smart, efficient floor plan than a large, wasteful one; small spaces can still be gracious." Check out Leger Wanaselja's design for a Richmond home made from decommissioned shipping containers on the Build It Green home tour June 1.

Build smart

Looking back to our grandparents' generation, eco-conscious architects consider the passive solar components of a design. Rather than relying solely on modern-day conveniences of heating and air conditioning, they create heat or cold-storing thermal mass walls, place and size windows to maximize sunlight and ventilation, and build eaves that provide appropriate shade.

Then they add the best of modern technology — solar power systems, tankless water heaters, energy efficient furnaces and eco-friendly insulation to facilitate comfort without compromising the environment.

"It's exciting to have a house that works well," says Leger.

Breathe easy

Avoiding toxic products doesn't mean living in a visually antiseptic environment. The number of attractive environmentally friendly products has grown tremendously in the past few years. Many stores carry green alternatives alongside their regular offerings.

"Due to high consumer demand, we have installed a whole wall of green flooring samples," says Joseph Gurdock, sales manager at Franklin Floor Covering in Lafayette. Gurdock says linoleum is the most sought after eco-flooring option, but engineered flooring that uses less wood than solid hardwood flooring is also in high demand.

Bamboo and cork floors continue to hold their popularity.

Ecohome Improvement in Berkeley offers a new line of cork flooring and wall coverings made from 80 percent reclaimed wine stoppers and 20 percent post-industrial wine stopper pulp. Customers are even encouraged to bring their corks to the store for recycling.

Solid unfinished hardwoods that are produced with the help of the Healthy Forests Healthy Communities (HFHC) partnership give traditional flooring a new twist.

"Solid wood flooring is sold unfinished, giving each client the opportunity to select a low-toxicity finish that most appeals to them and fits their needs," says sales associate Harold Pierce.

Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) are chemicals that are emitted as gases from certain solids or liquids. They have potential health risks and, unfortunately, are prevalent in traditional floor and wall finishes.

Ecohome Improvement carries several lines of paint that have zero VOCs, including the American Pride Paint line that can be tinted to match a standard paint line's colors. Early versions of low-VOC paint were mostly offered in tepid shades of beige, but now the sky/sea/sand is the limit.

"We really can make any color into a zero, not just low, VOC paint — even jet black," says Pierce.

Kitchen know-how

Given the cost and complexity of remodeling a kitchen, it's exciting that eco-friendly options abound when it comes to cabinetry, countertops and appliances. Alison Wilson, design consultant at Ecohome Improvement, says that custom cabinets made from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) wood or "rapidly renewable" bamboo are popular and not more expensive than other custom cabinetry.

Once installed, the cabinets can be topped with countertop materials made from concrete, recycled glass, paper, cork or FSC-certified butcher block.

The recycled glass and concrete materials like those from Richmond's "Vetrazzo" comes in a dazzling array of colors ranging from beer-bottle brown to Skyy Vodka-bottle blue.

Richlite paper countertops are both durable and pleasant to touch and can be crafted to include built-in drainboards around a sink.

A new paper product from Paperstone combines paper and bamboo to create lighter colors than the traditional Richlite products.

When shopping for appliances look for models that have merited the Energy Star rating, signifying that they have met strict energy efficient guidelines. And look to European manufacturers who have wrestled with energy efficiency for some time now and have come up with innovative options.

For example, the Fagor line from Spain features an induction cooktop that uses 90 percent of the energy it generates, and the Asko line of dishwasher and washing machines touts low water consumption.

Furnish responsibly

San Francisco designer Joel Robare finds eco-bliss in vintage furniture.

"Vintage and antique furnishings are the ultimate in green design," says Robare. "They boast wonderful craftsmanship that still looks great and shows that you can reinvent a design in a fresh new way without generating more product."

More mainstream furniture companies are incorporating environmentally sound principles in their manufacturing process. For example, you can buy "bio-based upholstery" at High Cotton in North Berkeley from Lee manufacturers. These pieces are built with FSC-certified wood frames, soy-based cushions, recycled-fiber filling for pillows and organic fabrics.

Another line with an eye to green design is Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams, which features regenerated fiber cushions and sustainably forested parawood frames.

"Other manufacturers are offering more organic and eco-friendly textiles to meet consumer demand," says owner Jim Kennedy. "In the last six months we've definitely seen an increased interest in green design."

And while we're on the subject of textiles, consider greening your hobbies. Organic fabrics and yarns are the next new thing in the textile world.

At Stone Mountain & Daughter in Berkeley you can find woven fabrics made from organic cotton, bamboo, hemp and seaweed in earthy, neutral shades. Brighter colors are found in organic knits made from a combination of cotton and polyester. And when it comes to eco-friendly yarns look for organic cottons, wools and even yarns made from bamboo and corn.

"But be aware that there are no real industry standards," says Elaine Logan of Walnut Creek's FashionKnit. "You have to weigh a number of factors — how far the yarn had to travel to get to you, what kinds of dyes were used to create the color and whether it took more water to produce it."

Green your greens

When it comes to greening your outdoor living spaces, you can focus on native plants — check out the Bringing Back the Natives Tour May 4, for inspiration in your own microclimate. If you prefer a more colorful English garden look, you can apply Leger's advice by thinking small when it comes to landscaping.

Garden designer Keeyla Meadows has replaced most of her Albany backyard with a vibrant tile and cement hardscape, and raised flower beds that save water.

"The hardscape design creates a number of intimate, meditative spaces, and the concentrated planted areas are quite lush," says Meadows. "This is a small, standard lot of only 500 square feet, but it feels much bigger — it's a way to live well in a dense, urban space." Check out Meadows's garden on the Park Day School Secret Garden Tour April 27.

Bottom line

Choose sustainable environments.

"Part of being green is not building more than what you really use," says San Francisco designer Steven Miller. "Comfort is key — if you create livable environments that people use and enjoy you're practicing green design."

Another way to look at "sustainability" is how your environment sustains you, says Meadows. "If our homes and gardens are places where we connect to nature and are at peace, we are participating in sustainable design."

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Resources

- **Ecohome Improvement**
2617 + 2619 San Pablo Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94702
510-644-3500
<http://www.ecohomeimprovement.com>
- **FashionKnit**
675 Ygnacio Valley Road
Walnut Creek, CA 94596
925-943-3994
www.fashionknit.net
- **Franklin Floor Covering**
1037 Blackwood Lane
Lafayette, CA 94549
925-284-1959
www.franklinfloorcovering.com

- **High Cotton**
1820 Solano Ave. at Colusa
Berkeley, CA 94707
510-526-4770
www.highcottonliving.com
- **Leger Wanaselja**
Architecture
2320 McGee Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94703
510-848-8901
www.lwarc.com
- **Stone Mountain & Daughter**
2518 Shattuck Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94704
510-845-6106
www.stonemountainfabric.com
- **Joel Robare -- JR Studio**
117 Lower Terrace
San Francisco, CA 94114
877-JR STUDIO
www.JRStudioDesign.com
- **Steven Miller Design Studio**
550 15th Street, Suite 39
San Francisco, CA 94103
415-934-8088
www.stevenmillerdesignstudio.com

Tours

- **Build It Green**
www.builditgreen.org
- **Bringing Back the Natives**
www.bringingbackthenatives.net
- **Secret Gardens of the East Bay**
www.secretgardentour.org

URL: http://www.contracostatimes.com/ci_9054340