

# Improve Your Home's Environment

Breathe easy with low-VOC paint products  
by **Mario Guertin**

Over the last few decades, the effect of human activity on the environment has become increasingly well documented. The same can be said of the effect of the environment on humans. One aspect of that environment is the air that we breathe; many pollutants can adversely affect the quality of air, especially indoors. One type of these pollutants is called Volatile Organic Compounds, commonly referred to as VOCs. VOCs can come from a variety of sources, such as building materials, adhesives, solvents, paints, paint strippers, varnishes, cleaning products and more.

According to studies conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), VOC levels inside homes are typically two to five times higher than outside. Certain activities such as stripping paint, varnishing large surfaces or painting with oil coatings can temporarily increase VOC levels to 1,000 times the level outside.

The painting industry has responded to VOC regulations and concerns by developing an array of environmentally friendly paints, varnishes, paint strippers and more. These eco-friendly products can be grouped into the following three categories:

## Natural paints

These paints contain no VOCs because they use ingredients such as water, plant oils and resins, clay, milk casein and mineral dyes. To learn more about natural paint products available, visit the Web sites for Green Planet Paints and The Real Milk Paint Co.

## Zero-VOC paints

In order to be considered a zero-VOC paint, the paint may not have more than 5 grams of VOCs per liter. Adding color tints may increase VOC levels by up to 10 grams per liter. Currently, several zero-VOC products are available, like Benjamin Moore's EcoSpec, Sherwin-Williams' Harmony, all Yolo Colorhouse paints, Kelly-Moore's Enviro-Cote and ICI's Lifemaster 2000.

## Low-VOC paints


In order to meet the EPA standards, a low-VOC paint or stain may not exceed 200 grams of VOCs per liter for paints, 300 grams per liter for varnishes. Furthermore, products can also meet the Green Seal certification standards. Green Seal is a non-profit organization that looks at the entire life cycle of paints, adhesives, cleaning solutions and paper products—from chemical composition to delivery methods—and certifies only environmentally preferable products. Products that meet the

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Photos courtesy of Benjamin Moore, YOLO Colorhouse and Sherwin-Williams

Green Seal standard may not have more than 50 grams of VOCs per liter—a much stricter standards than the EPA certification. Low-VOC products on the market today include Pittsburg Paints' Pure Performance line, Benjamin Moore's Saman line of wood stains and new Aura line of paints, recently introduced to the Chicago market.

A lot of research is being done by the coatings industry to develop environmentally friendly paints that also perform well. Read the manufacturer's material safety data sheet (MSDS) for each product you consider using—it will give all the information you need to know. Be aware that the method of application for some paints may vary from the usual methods, and it is best to rely on a low-VOC experienced painting professional. 

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