

Be aware of chemicals that products contain

This article is provided by local Realtors and the Ontario Real Estate Association (OREA) for the benefit of consumers in the real estate market.

Have you ever taken the time to carefully read the ingredient lists on all your favorite household cleaning products and pesticides? If so, are you familiar with the properties of the chemicals they contain? Do you know what paradichlorobenzene or diethylene are?

Most of today's convenience cleaners are popular because they work quickly requiring little if any, elbow grease. But often, the ingredients of these polishes, disinfectants, drain cleaners and cleansers can be quite toxic, and can get into the environment through their manufacture, use or disposal.

The next time you're shopping for cleaners or pesticides, check the label first. Products containing toxic ingredients are tagged with small symbols, rating the type of hazard they pose. A skeletal hand, for instance, indicates a product is corrosive and can seriously damage tissue, while a skull and crossbones indicates it is toxic or poisonous.

Many "green" consumers are making a conscious effort to switch to safer, less toxic alternatives. These alternatives are cheaper, safer and get the job done just as well. Some may require a little more muscle and take longer to work, but the payoff - a healthier, cleaner environment both in and outside of your home - is well worth it.

Here are a few tips on how to become a more "environmentally friendly" consumer.

CLEANERS AND CLEANSERS

Concoct your own all-purpose cleaners. Just mix a half-cup of ammonia with a half cup of white vinegar, then add a quarter-cup of baking soda and half a gallon of water. (Never mix ammonia or vinegar with chlorine bleach, because both mixtures produce harmful toxic fumes).

If you want an alternative disinfectant, try mixing a half-cup of borax with a gallon of water.

To clean surfaces, you may want to try a mixture of vinegar, salt and water. A paste made up baking soda and water is particularly effective on hard-to-clean areas. Simply scrub the paste into the surface being cleaned. Let it sit for half an hour and then sponge it off.

For an effective toilet bowl cleaner, use a toilet brush and baking soda. Disinfect by pouring half a cup of bleach in the bowl.

To clean your drain, try tossing in one or two handfuls of bicarbonate of soda, followed by a half-cup of vinegar. You can also pour boiling water down the drain once a week to help keep it clog-free.

To make your windows squeaky clean, mix two tablespoons of vinegar in one quart of water.

To freshen the air in your house, try putting out a dish of baking soda or vinegar to absorb odors. Traditional air fresheners work by simply masking one odor with another, or dulling the sense of smell.

You can also use houseplants to keep the air in your home more pollutant-free. Philodendrons and spider plants, for example, can absorb and reduce some air pollutants.

OUTSIDE

The same rules of thumb apply outside your home as well. Instead of using chemical fertilizer, try using compost. Rich in nutrients, compost is a great soil booster and is

created through the breakdown of organic material.

To keep pesky insects at bay in your garden, there are many things you can do, including planting strong-smelling herbs such as basil, chives, garlic, sage and onions, or flowers such as chrysanthemums and marigolds. You may even want to use natural predators such as ladybugs. Check with your local gardening centre or nursery to see if they sell these insects.

You can also keep your garden free of plant debris. To make your own insecticide, add two tablespoons of soap flakes to a litre of water and apply the solution with a watering can.

You can control weeds to a great degree by keeping your grass short, hoeing your garden and hand weeding. Mulch can be used around plants as well, to prevent weed

growth.

For more information about alternatives, contact an environmental group in your area or local Ministry of the Environment office.

The best-laid plans



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Preserving food age-old tradition

Our ancestors discovered through trial and error that some foods were safe to eat and others were deadly. It was a risky business learning what mushrooms could safely be fried up with the antelope steak and which fruits could be eaten for dessert.

Once people learned what was safe to eat, they began developing methods of preserving those foods, says University of Guelph food science professor Marc Le Maguer.

In northern climates, for example, meat was kept frozen until ready to be cooked. In hotter countries, spices were used to preserve and to mask the smell and flavor as the meat began to go off. Salting and smoking were popular methods of preserving meat and fish.

The efforts begun centuries ago to preserve food continue to be a major focus of food scientists today, says Le Maguer. "In fact, the contributions of food scientists and nutritionists equal those of medical science in prolonging the life span," he says.

The nitrate used in bacon, ham and smoked meats to prevent the growth of the deadly bacterium botulinum is actually salt petre, used for centuries as a meat preservative. The sodium benzoate added to jams and jellies to prevent the growth of yeast and mould occurs naturally as benzoic acid in cranberries, says Goff.

Although scientists are constantly learning more about food and how to make it safe, there continue to be unknown risks, says Le Maguer. In addition, known risks are showing up in different forms. In recent years, the scientific community has discovered the adaptability of microorganisms, identifying new problems caused by old pathogens.

Until recently, for example, salmonella bacteria were thought to be limited to meat and unwashed eggshells. Now, some scientists suspect the transovarian transmission of Salmonella enteritidis, a strain virulent for humans.

The Listeria monocytogenes bacterium, known for some time to cause disease in animals, has only in recent years been linked to food. In 1983, an outbreak of listeriosis in Canada was eventually traced back to cabbage that had been fertilized with sheep manure.

Changes in eating habits, food production and food-handling techniques, as well as in demographics and in our perception of what constitutes a hazard, may all contribute to the emergence of "new" food-borne diseases in the future, Le Maguer says.

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