

Natural Products

M A R K E T P L A C E

JULY 2007

naturalproducts | natural home



The Green Movement Comes Home

by Kyle Bradley

In recent years, the green movement has grown and natural products offerings have become numerous.

Public awareness of issues such as global warming has been the impetus for conversion to environmentally-friendly behavior on a large scale. Advocates of green living and manufacturers of eco-friendly products have seen the shift in consumer behavior and widened the scope of the issue by emphasizing such concepts as the carbon footprint and sustainability. And despite a love of convenience in the United States, many consumers are endeavoring to be part of the solution. "Everyone is starting to realize the impact we are having on our Earth and the dangers that come along with pollution and global warming," said Robin Levine, Eco-Me. However, while consumer awareness is increasing, green consumerism isn't universally defined. Further, non-existent regulations and efficacy standards for natural home products are creating some confusion in the market.

On one hand, the broadness of current definitions is good because consumers easily see the many roles they can play in the green movement; but, the same broadness has allowed product manufacturers to form not-so-honest advertising campaigns.

"Many companies play on the words natural, green and biodegradable," said Cindy Rimer, vice president, sales and marketing, Biokleen. "If a product says 'biodegradable,' [consumers] need to remind themselves that almost everything is biodegradable. If a product says 'natural,' often it may have ingredients that are natural but may also contain others that are not."

Still, any degree of natural is better than all conventional in most cases. "Very loose regulations, more concerned with protecting trade secrets than public health, allow manufacturers to put any combination of chemicals in a conventional cleaning product without meaningful safety testing," said Chrystie Heimert, public relations director, Seventh Generation. Holly Bornstein of CleanWell Today said her company is trying to encourage label literacy because consumers can't always rely on companies to be totally truthful about products.

Levine agreed, adding: "Look at the color and smell of the product—fragrance is a word that hides many chemicals, which are often undisclosed and harmful."

Some consumers are driven to change because of allergies or health conditions. "More people are becoming sensitive or allergic to synthetic fragrances and dyes because they are so overused in mainstream cleaners," Rimer said. Biokleen targets these consumers by keeping its products free of artificial fragrances and colors, and offering a fragrance-free line for consumers who cannot tolerate any fragrance.

"Consumers, especially those who contend with skin or respiratory allergies, have seen significant benefits from using oleo (plant-derived) surfactants," said Colin Taylor, research and development, V.I.P. Soap Products. "Plant-based products are far less harsh or corrosive than petrochemical blends—for example, ethyl lactate replaces ethylene glycol butyl ether, a petrochemical solvent known to alter blood chemistry." He added there's been a marked increase in demand for washing products that are hypoallergenic and mild.

Savvy parents are also taking action for the health of their children. "We've found new parents are particularly open to making the switch," Heimert said. "They want to protect their kids at any cost."

Other consumers make the change for peace of mind. "All the regulations and cautions sometimes scare consumers," said Justine Lopez, marketing coordinator, Howard Naturals. "They are relieved to see natural cleaning products more widely available." Price and unfamiliarity are still roadblocks for natural home products, but growing natural and organic inventories in conventional stores are getting people thinking, and they're getting smart on their own by reading labels—not just tossing products in their grocery cart. "Nobody knows the



long term effects of exposure to household chemicals, but with the rise of asthma, allergies and unknown answers to a host of rising illnesses, people need to evaluate all toxins in and around the home, including cleaning products," Rimer said.

Does This Stuff Work?

Of course, all the concerns won't keep a consumer using a product that doesn't actually work. The idea of switching to a product with no potentially dangerous chemicals is great, but consumers expect similar or better results from natural home products and some are hesitant to switch because earlier natural products didn't deliver. "Back in the '80s and '90s, a lot of green products really didn't do a very good job, and that probably set the whole thing back quite a lot because people out there [still] have that very strong perception," noted Allen Stedman, president, Planet Inc.

Still, manufacturers reason that increased placement of natural home products alongside conventional products suggests customers can expect comparable results. "There still may be some concerns due to early-on alternative products that did not perform well," said Brian Ross, TWIST. "But because there has been so much recent attention to green living and the natural home category, consumers are receiving the message that today's products are better, and that natural options work just as well as conventional standards."

While some companies can showcase what notably dangerous substances are left out of their products, others point out biodegradability, organic material usage, or other eco-friendly attributes of their product lines to give their natural product claims grounding. Protecting overall health and avoiding toxicity issues are also obvious advantages of going green.

Soaps and Such

The concept of a green product is basic to Stedman. "It has to do with how much chemistry you have to do to get to the end product," he noted—the less chemical reactions, the more natural the product. Stedman's Planet Inc. brand produces a full line of cleaning and laundry options, while his Green Forest paper brand produces bathroom tissue and paper towels made from 100 percent recycled paper—40 percent of which is post consumer paper waste—and whitened without chlorine, which has been linked to watershed pollution and ecosystem damage.

Stedman noted his company emphasizes biodegradability, a concept he believes is easily understood by many consumers. "In terms of chemical structure, that means [products] tend to be molecules in long strings, rather than rings," he said. "Because rings tend to be a lot more stable, they're tougher to break down." The biodegradability claim from Planet Inc. is also certified by Scientific Certification Systems (SCS).

However, concentrating on ingredients is only part of the issue. "It's not always a matter of this versus that," Rimer said. "It takes a lot of research, testing and reformulating." Using natural extracts and essential oils in cleaning products, Biokleen avoids cheap fillers such as water and salt derivatives, dyes and synthetic fragrances. Natural extracts of grapefruit seed, lime, orange peel, soy and essential oils replace petroleum distillates, solvents, chlorine, phosphates, ammonia, butyl glycol ether, sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS), and preservatives EDTA and DEA. "Every ingredient we use in our product has purpose," Rimer noted. She also reported the company has worked with organizations such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in its Design for the Environment (DfE) program (epa.gov/dfe), in which participating

companies must meet stringent guidelines for natural cleaning product certification. Rimer also noted Biokleen is aware of the carbon footprint concept, and that its concentrated formulas allow the company to reduce shipping materials (paper and plastic packaging), which guards the environment from more pollution, conserves space in landfills, and saves consumers money in the long run.

In fact, many companies are standing behind the power of natural surfactants, a practice with implications for health and beyond. "We have replaced petroleum distillates with vegetable-derived ingredients such as coconut oil and soy oil," Lopez said. So, "there are also the environmental benefits that come from putting only vegetable-derived ingredients back into the ecosystem."

Krinsky said Lotus Brands is doing the same. "Tea tree oil and lavender are both well known traditionally for their purifying action and natural fragrance capabilities," he said. "We also use citrus oil in our dish soap, well known for its cleaning power." He added the company's surfactants are non-ionic, and thus biodegradable.

Another useful compound is saponin from Chinese soapberries, the natural surfactant in Maggie's Soap Nuts™. "Our soap nuts replace SLS," said Maggie Dawson, Maggie's Soap Nuts. "Saponin removes the accumulated soap scum and residue from clothes and [the] washing machine." No SLS or soap residue means less chance of skin irritation or other allergic reactions.

Another company bringing natural home cleaning products to market has gone back to the basics, helping consumers discover the safe and effective cleaning substances they may

already have in their cupboards. "The basic concept behind Eco-Me Kits is that you can mix up your own products with basics like baking soda, olive oil, white vinegar, water and baking powder," Levine said. "Using pantry staples to clean a house has been around for ages, and we have modernized this for today's customer." The baking soda, vinegar, etc., in the company's mixes are combined with tea tree oil for antibacterial and antifungal duties, and essential oil for natural fragrance. "We work with chemists at the lab where we blend our essential oils and have our products tested for performance and safety," to make sure the mixed products are safe and effective, Levine said.

Other Goods

Soaps and cleaners aren't the only natural home products available to green consumers, and potential greenies should understand the movement is comprehensive. "If consumers have the choice between a comparable conventional product and one that is green, they are choosing the green alternative," Ross said. In this case, it's TWIST's line of utility sponges. Instead of a synthetic, plastic scrubber attached to a sponge, TWIST uses a loofah. "The loofah is a plant that has been in use for hundreds of years throughout the world for scrubbing pots and pans, and is not only biodegradable but lasts longer than the plastic scrubber and does not retain odors," Ross noted. TWIST also introduced the biodegradable Euro Cloth and Euro Sponge to cut down on paper towel waste. Ross says the Euro Cloth has the absorbency of a paper towel with the reusability of a sponge, and TWIST estimates one Euro Cloth to be equal to about 17 rolls of paper towels.

Future greenies can also look to the movement for controlling pests that may be jeopardizing their health, or the health of their families. "Dust mites are known for sparking allergic reactions in sensitive people," noted Eileen Sheets, managing director, Bioforce USA. "In fact, many doctors now feel dust mites are the reason for the increase in

childhood asthma." But instead of attacking these invisible pests with chemicals that could linger in furniture fabrics, cause skin and eye irritation, and take years to biodegrade, Bioforce developed Mites-Out! The product is based on bioactive seed components of the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss). A German study on the efficacy of neem-based products as acaricides (substances used to kill mites), which included Bioforce's Mites-Out!, showed neem oil contained substances which had a distinct effect on the house dust mite *D. Farinae* (*Allergo J.* 13:269-73, 2004). The substances did not have any acaricide effect, but successfully hindered the mites' growth by an appetite reduction mechanism. The synergy of neem oil and other compounds in Mites-Out! doesn't do the work of benzyl benzoate, the usual ingredient in conventional synthetic acaricides, but they do provide a natural alternative without dangerous side effects.

Converting the Nay Sayers

Any outstanding questions on the efficacy of natural home products can only be answered with empirical evidence. Because humans are also creatures of habit, retailers may have to do some convincing to overcome efficacy stigmas still discouraging conventional consumers from making the jump to natural products. Manufacturers agree, though, that with personal health at stake, the green movement can only gain momentum.

As always, retailers can propel the green movement forward by informing rookie green consumers of the virtues of green living, both for the quality of their own health and the health of the environment. Retailers should do their best to work with companies that fully disclose product ingredient lists—no exceptions. Also, global issues such as reducing the carbon footprint of products comprising store inventories should be on the minds of retailers, as should biodegradability and sustainability. It's in mankind's best interest that the scope of the movement and the many ways consumers can participate becomes common knowledge.

