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Home Improvement

Earth-Friendly Materials Go Mainstream

By ERNEST BECK

YOUR local home improvement store may never be the same again.

In recent years, an organic food revolution has filled supermarket shelves with products like hormone-free milk. Now, growing consumer interest is encouraging a new generation of green homebuilding retailers. These environmentally conscious stores, which sell such items as eco-timber and insulation made of recycled jeans, are poised to become a national presence.

"The time is ripe, the market is ready, and the products are mature," said Greg Snowden, the chief executive of Green Fusion Design Center, in San Anselmo, Calif., which opened in 2004. He says he expects sales at Green Fusion, which is described on the company's Web site as "a unique retail store, gallery and education center," to double, to \$2 million this year, compared with 2005.

Just a few years ago, green-minded homeowners were relegated to buying supplies in small stores with a limited selection of merchandise, most of it imported. But today the idea of green homebuilding is becoming more mainstream.

At Green Fusion, environmentally friendly wares like plant-based paints, organic bedding (an all-wool king-size mattress costs \$2,000) and cork flooring from Portugal (sustainably harvested from the outer bark of oak trees and selling at \$5 to \$8 a square foot) are laid out to allow customers "to experience the lifestyle in a place that was created with healthy materials," Mr. Snowden said.

He is so confident that he has secured the Web address greenhomedepot.com with an eye to expanding Green Fusion to a regional, and possibly national, chain in the next few years. But he is not the only green retailer thinking big.

Timothy N. Taylor, chief executive of the Environmental Home Center, a large green building supplier in Seattle, says his company has national ambitions, too.

"There's no question where this is going; it's hot," Mr. Taylor said, noting that his company has grown from an 800-square-foot storefront in 1992 to a multimillion dollar business today with a 30,000-square-foot facility.

Across the country, there are several established green retailers, like Environmental Building Supplies, in Portland, Ore., and Environmental Construction Outfitters in the Bronx, both of which have been around for more than a decade. Newcomers include a. k a. Green, in Scottsdale, Ariz., and Greenmaker, in Chicago, which opened last year.

Not to be outdone, Home Depot is testing a green theme in all of its Canadian stores. EcoOptions, as it is called, is part of a marketing effort that promotes environmentally friendly products, including natural fertilizer and mold-resistant drywall.

If Canadians respond, "we could imagine rolling it out in the U.S.," said Ron Jarvis, a merchandising vice president at the Home Depot in Atlanta.

Wendy Liebmann, the president of WSL Strategic Retail, a retail consultancy in New York, says the Home Depot's flirtation with green reflects a fundamental shift in consumer attitudes.

"There is a growing sensibility and sensitivity about taking care of ourselves, our homes, and our earth," Ms. Liebmann said. "It's not a fringe movement like we saw 15 years ago."

But as green building supplies go mainstream, consumers must confront new terms, such as off-gasses, and confusing product names.

What, for example, is Kirei board? (Answer: a construction material for cabinetry made of reclaimed agricultural fiber: it sells for \$150 for a 3-foot-by-6-foot sheet.)

Alison Kartiganer faced these challenges a few years ago, when she built a weekend home on an island near Seattle. While researching the advantages of recycled steel gutters and a tankless water heater, she puzzled over technical issues like the acceptable volume of volatile-organic compounds in paint.

"You have to dive down deep to really know what they are talking about," said Ms. Kartiganer, 33, who is a producer at Cranium, a board game company in Seattle. Eventually, she says, she modified her greenness and went with low-V.O.C. paint, instead of one with none at all, for a simple reason: it was available at a store on the morning she needed it.

Homebuilders need not feel guilty about compromising, however. There is no such thing as a perfectly green product, according to Mr. Taylor at the Environmental Home Center. "There's green and not so green and shades of green," he explained. "If we only sold dark green, we wouldn't have much to sell."

Unfortunately for consumers, there is no all-encompassing regulatory system or governmental body that oversees or establishes green standards for the entire industry. So for the most part, green retailers select products based on their own criteria, often with the help of consultants.

While most people endorse the benefits of going green, it is unclear how many are willing to pay extra for it. Green products generally command a higher price than their conventional counterparts: organic paint from Livos, a German company, for example, costs \$79.15 for 1.3 gallons compared with \$17 a gallon for ordinary Benjamin Moore latex. Still, it is a premium homeowners may be willing to pay to improve their own health and the planet's, according to Willem Maas, the publisher of GreenHomeGuide.com, a Web site on green design.

Buying green products versus conventional ones, Mr. Maas said, "is like comparing an artisan baguette to a loaf of Wonder Bread."