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FRIDAY

FEBRUARY 10, 2006

REAL ESTATE CLASSIFIED INSIDE AND ONLINE

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Down-to-earth improvements

By Lisa Bertagnoli | Special to the Tribune

Last fall, Cissa Pinto, then expecting her first child, dropped into a Home Depot to buy some varnish for a chest of drawers. She turned over the can, discovered a warning about birth defects, set the can down and walked out of the store.

Pinto and her husband, Benjamin Arnold, ended up varnishing the chest of drawers and painting the baby's room, formerly a dining room, with "green" paint and varnish lacking the volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that create the odor—and sometimes headaches—of a freshly painted room.

"I really wouldn't be concerned for myself, but for a little baby... they're so delicate," Arnold said.

Arnold and Pinto, whose son, Alexandre, was born in November, went "green" out of concern for their newborn's health. And that's just one of the reasons homeowners decide to use green, or sustainable, products during a remodel.

"People have intolerances to these things," meaning the chemicals in paint and other building materials, said Frederic Renold, M.D., an allergist at Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago. Renold pointed out, however, that there is no proven link between VOCs and asthma or hives; and that mold, in fact, is the biggest producer of VOCs. "One issue we worry about is the way houses are built," Renold said.

Another reason for going green: An altruistic desire to conserve the Earth's resources. "Choosing products or materials in a way that preserves those materials for future generations is very possible if we think about how we do things," says Barry Bursak, a Chicago-based consultant on sustainable interiors and home furnishings.

Of course, saving money is an incentive. Low-flush toilets, energy-efficient windows and insulation made from soy products or recycled denim all help conserve natural resources and cut down on energy bills as well, says Ori

Get more green

If saving on your energy bills isn't enough incentive to go green, perhaps saving on your income taxes may be. For the next two years, homeowners can qualify for a total tax credit of up to \$500 for making energy-efficient improvements, such as installing energy-efficient windows, insulation, doors, roofs and heating and cooling equipment.

The tax credits are part of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, which went into effect in January. Credits include up to \$200 for new exterior windows; up to \$300 for an efficient central air conditioner or water heater; up to \$150 for an efficient furnace; and credits for 10 percent of the cost for insulation, energy-efficient doors or reflective roofs.

A credit equal to 30 percent of the cost also is available for qualified solar photovoltaic and solar water-heating systems. The credit cannot exceed \$2,000.

Qualified consumers will be able to itemize purchases on their federal income tax form beginning in tax year 2006. The tax credits apply for improvements made between Jan. 1, 2006, and Dec. 31, 2007. Improvements must be made to the taxpayer's principal residence.

In addition to the home improvement tax credits, the act also provides tax credits to buyers of hybrid cars and to builders of highly efficient new homes. For more information on federal tax credits go online to www.energystar.gov.

—Tribune staff

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GREEN: Ecofriendly products may cost more

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Sivan, co-owner of Greenmaker, a Chicago-based retailer of ecofriendly building materials.

Although ecofriendly building is an established industry, complete with a set of guidelines (LEED certification), green remodeling "is in its infancy," said Karen Kaplan, owner of New Leaf Interiors, a Skokie-based interior design firm that helps remodelers go green. "There's a learning curve...a lot of manufacturers still have to make products that conform to green standards."

Still, green remodeling products do exist, though at a price point that retailers estimate is 15 percent to 20 percent higher than conventional products. Green remodeling choices include paint, flooring, cabinets and furniture. Here's a run-down of what's available, and some caveats to watch for:

PAINT. "It's a no brainer," in a remodeling project, said Sivan of Greenmaker. Sustainable paints do not contain VOCs and come in the same variety of colors and finishes (flat, eggshell and semigloss) as conventional paints. However, just because a paint can label says "No VOCs" doesn't mean it is free of harmful chemicals, Bursak warns. Sivan lists American Pride and Safecoat as two trustworthy brands. Prices run \$35 to \$40 a gallon. Traditional paint companies such as Benjamin Moore also make low-VOC paints.

Benjamin Arnold used Safecoat in shades of blue and yellow to paint Alexandre's room. Although he said the painted walls look good, the paint handled a bit differently than a conventional product: "It was slightly pasty. I thought, 'What's going on here?'" he said.

FLOORING. Sustainable hardwood bears the label FSC, which stands for Forest Stewardship Council. FCS, an international organization based in Bonn, Germany, certifies that the forests from which wood was taken are replanted properly, that the soil is properly cared for and that the harvesting does not



Out of concern for their son, Alexandre, Benjamin Arnold and Cissa Pinto, chose an ecofriendly paint for his nursery.

harm the human or animal population around the forests. Such woods cost about 30 percent more than conventional woods.

Other flooring options include Ecotimber, a brand of wood reclaimed from old barns and other structures; cork; and bamboo. Sivan, however, warns that not all bamboo is ecofriendly and good quality. "You have to look for harvesting, curing, drying and gluing."

For kitchens, Marmoleum is linoleum-like floor covering made from rosin, linseed oil and wood flour and available in different colors and patterns. Whatever flooring you choose, make sure to clean it with a "green" cleaning agent.

"Why would you get a green home and then use toxic chemicals?" asked Gail Makris, a Chicago-based green building consultant.

CARPETING. While synthetic carpet and padding are a major source of "outgassing," or the release of chemicals into a home's environment, carpet tiles, which are pressed onto the floor, are ecofriendly, according to Makris. Shaw Carpeting's EcoSolutions Q and Interface's FLOR are two examples of ecofriendly carpets.

CABINETS. Cabinets that do not use formaldehyde as a binder are one of Greenmaker's most popular products, Sivan said. An average set of kitchen cabinets at Greenmaker costs \$4,000 to \$5,000, compared to about \$3,000 at Home Depot, Sivan said. He added that he's working with manufacturers and trying to devise stock designs to make the cabinets more affordable.

FURNITURE. Bursak said he's working with local furniture designers to encourage them to work with forest-friendly woods

as well as down or unbleached organic cotton and wool stuffings. Jill Salisbury, a Barrington-based furniture designer, has a line of ecofriendly furniture called eL: Environmental Language, sold mainly to interior designers through her showroom at the Merchandise Mart.

One of the most popular sustainable upholstery fabrics is made from recycled plastic bottles, according to Kaplan. The fabric is moisture- and stain-resistant, but currently mostly used in contract furnishings.

Other design elements: Countertops of Ice Stone, a product made from cement, fly ash (a remnant of the coal-burning process) and recycled glass; stone flooring, as long as it's quarried within a reasonable distance (to cut down on the use of fossil fuels in its transport); soy-based insulation (Biofoam brand) and Ultratouch, insulation made from leftover threads and fibers produced in the manufacture of blue jeans; energy-efficient Velux and SunTunnel skylights; Solatube and Phillips energy-efficient lighting.

As many sustainable products as are available, most remodelers seem to prefer a piecemeal approach to their projects. One such remodeler is Sheila Donlan, who's working with Kaplan to redo the basement of her Deerfield ranch house. Donlan's considering a recycled-plastic covering for the sofa, bamboo or cork flooring and sustainable paint for the project.

"Certain things, I'll have to weigh the pros and cons," Donlan said, offering paint, which she deems a higher priority than an expensive bamboo floor, as an example. However, "if there's a green option available, I'll consider it."

A green glossary

Eco-terms aren't really as complicated as they seem, says Monica Gilchrist of the Green Building Resource Center in Santa Monica, Calif. Here's a primer:

Dual-flush toilet: A type of water-conserving toilet that is now becoming available for the home. After each use you have a choice of low flush (using as little as 0.8 gallon) or a more powerful flush (about 1.8 gallons).

Energy Star (www.energystar.gov): An energy-efficiency rating system sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency. A high Energy Star rating means that the product—from small appliances to entire homes—minimizes energy consumption.

Forest Stewardship Council (www.fsc.org): A third-party certification for wood, wood products and forests. If a product is FSC certified, you can count on its having been harvested and produced in an ecosystemic manner.

Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (www.usgbc.org/leed): Administered by the U.S. Green Building Council, the LEED rating is the most widely known and accepted green certification program. A LEED certification for residential projects was released in 2005.

Life-cycle analysis: The process of tracing a product from its origin through its final disposal or reuse. Ask yourself questions like: Where does it come from? How much energy was used to create it? What happens to it when you can no longer use it?

Low-flow faucets and shower heads: Installing low-flow fixtures is a simple and cheap way to conserve water. If you're in love with your current faucets and shower heads, amend them by installing aerators, which slow the flow and disperse water. This can reduce water use by about 10 percent.

Off-gassing: This is the emission of chemicals from building materials, furniture and textiles. Many of those "new house" smells are hazardous to our health—they accumulate in the bloodstream and have been linked by some scientists to the increasing rates of asthma and some cancers, particularly in children. Look for natural products that don't contain toxins such as formaldehyde.

Volatile organic compounds: The toxic or noxious chemicals that are found in or released from paints, stains, adhesives and sealants. Look for products labeled as having low, no or zero VOCs.

—Tribune Newspapers