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Eco-friendly paint, materials help homeowners be kind to the environment

By [Elizabeth Rhodes](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter

When visitors first set eyes on Renee and Arthur Salamon's 1928 North Seattle Craftsman, they see a vision in color. The exterior is bright yellow, with green and white trim and an orange front door. The living room is gold, the master bedroom a deep rose and the home office a dark red. Even the stairs leading to the lower level are colorful: periwinkle blue and turquoise.

What Renee Salamon sees, however, is not so much a vision of color as a picture of health.

Terribly affected by the various chemicals common in household products like wall paints and floor coverings, Salamon has systematically done everything she can to replace her home's personally toxic environment with one that's healthful.

"Once the carpeting had been replaced and the walls repainted, I felt, 'Oh, I can breathe again,'" says Salamon, a child and family therapist.

Interior designer Sandy Campbell, owner of 1Earth 1Design, increasingly is seeing homeowners like the Salamons. They're people for whom "going green" — using environmentally friendly home products —

"isn't so much a trend as it is a requirement. They have allergies, their kids have allergies or they have chemical sensitivities, and they feel bad."

Because of the increasingly popular "Built Green" program initiated by the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties, many people now realize they can buy a brand-new environmentally responsible home.

But what many may not realize is that older homes like the Salamons' can be retrofitted to be healthier and more environmentally conscious — and Seattle has a



[enlarge](#) STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Cosmo the cat finds a scratching post outside this North Seattle home, which was repainted with nontoxic, Earth-friendly paint. Owner Renee Salamon has resurfaced and remodeled the interior and exterior of her home with environmentally sensitive materials.

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unique store that will help them do it.

Tucked behind another building at 1724 Fourth Ave. S., the Environmental Home Center is one-stop shopping for everything from nontoxic paints, wallpaper, carpets, countertops and cleaning supplies to sustainably harvested wood floors and recycled materials of all kinds. Ever wonder where recycled glass goes? You can find it reborn here as luminously beautiful glass tiles.

While big-box home-improvement centers and hardware stores carry a few eco-aware products, only the Environmental Home Center carries nothing but, says Campbell.

"There's nothing else around like them. I think they do a lot of research, and the people in the store are really quite helpful. Is every single product the greenest ever? No, no necessarily," Campbell notes. "But it might be the best on the market now."

Renee Salamon purchased almost all her home-improvement supplies there: nontoxic glue, paint and paint remover; wood flooring free of harmful chemicals; and carpeting loomed from the wool of organic sheep.

This has allowed her to avoid contact with, among other irritants, formaldehyde. Ubiquitous in household and building products, it makes Salamon feel "kind of spacey ... in a fog." It's also a suspected human carcinogen, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. (The EPA's Web site, www.epa.gov, has extensive information, including health facts, about so-called "volatile organic chemicals" or VOCs, in thousands of household products.)

The Environmental Home Center was founded in 1991 by carpenter and contractor Matthew Freeman-Gleason. It's grown to a \$3.5-million-a-year business that stocks 1,500 products, has retail and wholesale customers and ships products nationwide.

On the surface, Freeman-Gleason's store does what others in the building and home-supply trade do: evaluates whether products are affordable and aesthetically pleasing. "But we also look at the sustainable factor, and it has to be healthy," says Freeman-Gleason. "So it isn't a question, for example, of whether or not to carry wood, but how is that wood harvested? Is it from sustainable resources?"

Tim Taylor, the store's president and CEO, says, "There are no perfect green products. They don't exist. In many ways the right product is in the mind of the consumer, for example, chemical sensitivity vs. recycled content. What we do is provide choices and help educate the customer, and then the customer gets to choose."

Among the center's best sellers:

See products in action

To see "Built Green" ideas and products in action, visit the Puget Sound Energy Built Green Idea Home at Issaquah Highlands on weekends through April 11. It's located at 1789 24th Ave. N.E., Issaquah. Driving directions and more information are available at www.issaquahhighlands.com or by calling 425-427-8736 after 10 a.m.

Guided tours are available on weekends beginning at 10 a.m. and ending at 5 p.m. Next Saturday, March 27, there will be a 45-minute free seminar on healthy choices for indoor air quality. It begins at 9:15 a.m. at the Idea Home, which was designed and built to demonstrate the latest in environmentally responsible products and concepts. It is being presented by the Master Builders of King and Snohomish Counties.



[enlarge](#)

STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Renee Salamon resurfaced and remodeled the inside of her North Seattle home with non-toxic, eco-friendly materials, including the paint on basement stairway.

- A solid-surface countertop material made of sheets of paper bonded by a resin that doesn't release vapors when cured.
- Natural cork flooring that's soft and warm underfoot.
- Formaldehyde-free kitchen cabinets made with sustainably harvested woods, such as maple.
- "Forest-friendly" hardwood floors. The choices here include bamboo and longleaf pine that are as hard as oak. There also are several species of reclaimed eucalyptus hardwoods from Australia.
- Wood decking and fencing that's free of arsenic and made from sustainably harvested trees, including juniper.

One longtime rap about environmental products is their high cost. Taylor says that's not as true as it used to be. A recent *Sunset* magazine cost comparison found that "low VOC" interior house paint is about \$5 more per gallon than designer latex, while environmentally friendly carpet made of recycled fiber is \$6 cheaper per square yard than 100 percent nylon.

Interior designer Campbell has found the costs competitive, too. She recently did a kitchen remodel using certified sustainable lumber and eco-friendly finishes "that didn't cost a penny more because we went green on it."

For Taylor and Freeman-Gleason, their business is "far more than selling products," Taylor says. "We view it as a transformative business — using the built environment to transform the global environment, one house at a time."

Still, asking people to change their buying habits to save the planet "doesn't resonate for a lot of people," Freeman-Gleason admits. "If you ask them, 'Would you be interested in products that are more durable, better for your health, beautiful and priced competitively?' These things pretty much resonate."

For Leslie Shapiro and Heather Harmon, all these factors resonated when they planned the recent remodel of their Capitol Hill home.

Shapiro's asthma was certainly a consideration, but "going environmental wasn't because of that," she says. "It was more of a belief set. As we were thinking about making our house a little bit larger, we thought the only way we'd feel OK about it was if we could use environmentally friendly and socially responsible materials and methods."

Using the Environmental Home Center as their main product resource, Shapiro and Harmon created a new dressing room, master bath and laundry center adjacent the master bedroom.

Among the products they used were a nontoxic wood finish called OS Hardwax and a heat-saving copper-coil system that captures heat from hot water flowing through the bathroom drain pipe and returns it to the water heater. Recycled glass tiles and madrone wood harvested from storm-felled trees also were used.

The result was so stunning it rated a three-page spread in a recent issue of *Fine Homebuilding* magazine, proof that environmental sensitivity doesn't have to take a back seat to good looks.

"That's the best part — you don't have to sacrifice design," Campbell says.

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