



It's easy being green this year with eco-friendly products

By Zeke Barlow

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It's never been easier to put an eco-friendly gift under the tree than this year, when traditional Christmas green takes on a whole new meaning.

For the discriminating T-shirt enthusiast, there is the \$73 shirt made from organic cotton and natural dyes depicting a "nature at night" design.

Or maybe you are more the type who would like an ornament of the North Star, made from all-recycled glass, of course.

A new two-seat, single-flush toilet is being marketed as a \$1,400 item that "saves marriages and the planet."

If you need further confirmation that being eco-savvy is in, just look at the uber-chic Barneys New York fashion store, which this year declared "green is the new black."

With experts saying global warming has become widely accepted, environmental-themed consumerism is at an all-time high, and companies are looking to cash in on the trend.

But just because something is marketed as green doesn't mean that it is necessarily good for the Earth — or you.

"I think in general it is good, but there are degrees of goodness associated with these green products," said Charlie Kolstad, a professor of environmental economics at the UC Santa Barbara Bren School of Environmental Science and Management. "There is substance to green consumerism, but that doesn't mean that everything that goes into that group has value to the Earth."

He said if people buy something just because it's green, they are still buying something, which ultimately is not the way to a healthier planet.

"One real danger we see is that people will think the world has changed and green consumerism and green products are going to solve our environmental problems, and that is not the case," he said.

Still, every little bit helps, said Evan Albright, who helped put on the Green Living Expo at the Ventura County Fairgrounds.

'Moving in the right direction'

The expo opened on Friday and continues today with more than 100 vendors gathered to show off their green products, from solar panels to organic bamboo socks.

"Everyone is doing something, and we are moving in the right direction," said Albright, who used to put on wedding trade shows but got into environmental ones a few years ago because it made good business sense and felt like the right thing to do. "We are helping people take baby steps, middle steps and big steps."

Albright said the environmental movement can be too elitist sometimes, and nobody should judge anyone if what they are doing is a contribution to help the Earth.

Kathy Amos and her friend Jina Biehn were perusing the expo when they came upon Ventura-based Korazon Organic Fashion, which makes style as important as sustainability.

"Thank God it became chic," Amos said of environmentally friendly clothing. For too long, it was usually baggy, hippie clothing that had no style, she said.

Biehn says she's a shopper at heart who loves high-quality, high-end clothing.

"I don't think we are going to spend less; our society is based on capitalism," Biehn said. "If you are going to buy stuff, you might as well buy green stuff."

But just because you are buying something labeled green doesn't mean it is, many say.

Since Terry Ennis started a Camarillo-based all natural beauty products company called Suds in a Bucket, she's seen tons of other beauty products that claim to be natural but contain chemicals found in regular products.

"The market is saturated with products that say they are natural," she said. "Because we are in a society that wants to go green, they (companies) want to make money."

Which is why there needs to be some type of certification of what makes a product environmentally friendly, said Matthew Kotchen, also an environmental economics professor at the Bren School.

"There is a race for people to put green labels on their stuff," he said. "What is lagging behind is a third-party way to certify this stuff."

Organic food started with independent certification, which was followed by the government stepping in and creating a program to validate organic claims. He said he thinks it's a matter of time before that setup reaches the larger green market.

Other consequences possible

But there could be other consequences of green consumerism.

If people spends more on a shirt because it's organic, they may feel less inclined to donate to environmental activist groups because they already paid more for the shirt, he hypothesized. Also, the demand for eco-products could hurt the Earth, he speculated. If everyone starts clamoring for shade-grown coffee, which is produced under trees in tropical climates, farmers could abandon their farms, where trees were already cut down and the damage was done. If shade-grown demand skyrockets, it could put more pressure on the forests, he said.

Kotchen said consumers should pick a few items they regularly use, study them and the companies that make them, and buy those products.

And if you think that buying a two-seater, single-flush toilet is a contribution to saving the Earth, that's OK, too.



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