

Sea of green: Market flooded with eco products

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Your Swiss Army knife, traditionally the ultimate combo invention, will do lots of neat stuff, but can it charge your cellphone? Cast a bright, triple-LED beam in an inky campground? How about bring in the ranting of your favourite talk radio host?

True, your knife never needs recharging, but the Freeplay Companion -- a combination AM/FM radio, flashlight and cellphone charger from Freeplay Energy -- does it in the most eco-friendly ways possible: via a mini solar panel or hand crank. Heck, an optional adapter even lets you plug it into your computer's USB port for deep battery charge.

The Companion, which sells for \$38.99 at Arbour Environmental Shoppe on Bank Street, is just one of a flood of new, environmentally sustainable products coming on stream in time for Earth Day on Tuesday.

For your eco pleasure, here is a grouping of new products to help around the home.

RONA AND CLOROX GO ECO

RONA stores have just launched ECO brand products consisting of compostable bags for organic waste (\$3.99 for 20 small bags, \$4.99 for 10 large ones), as well as biodegradable bathroom cleaner (\$3.99 for 946 mL) and outdoor window cleaner (\$7.99 for 1 L).

The products were selected in partnership with Ecole Polytechnique de Montréal's International Chair in Life Cycle Assessment. To qualify as ECO products, they must show less negative impact than their conventional counterparts over their entire life cycle, from resource acquisition to packaging to end of life. And while the cleaners are not disinfectants, neither do they contain chlorine or other worrisome ingredients. What's more, they comply with Environment Canada's stringent EcoLogo criteria, with certification apparently pending.

The bags, incidentally, are meant for municipal composting facilities, and will not break down in your backyard composter.

The Clorox Co., meanwhile, has introduced Green Works. It's a line of cleaning products derived from fruits and available at grocery stores and mass retailers. Both the Natural All-Purpose Cleaner and the Glass & Surface Cleaner got a thumbs-up for performance and eco-

responsibility in National Geographic's first Green Guide (on newsstands now, it's chock-full of ideas and product assessments).

Among the hottest areas in the green market, "natural" household cleaners and supplies saw 26 per- cent sales growth between January 2007 and January 2008, according to SPINS, an American market research and consulting firm for the natural-products sector.

But with the growing problem of greenwashing -- slapping meaningless labels like "natural" and "eco-friendly" on products of questionable environmental value -- you need to be a wary consumer. Publications like the Green Guide and shopping at reputable green stores can steer you through the marketing shoals.

PAINTS, TILES AND COUNTERTOPS

Painting projects on your spring spruce-up list? Check out the latest in low- and zero-VOC (volatile organic compound) paints. Benjamin Moore's Aura line and the LoVo products at Randall's paint stores around Ottawa are among the new generation of latex paints that minimize smog-contributing VOCs.

For tiles, have a look at the new Silestone MURO line. Perfect for backsplashes, shower floors and accents, the tiles -- which have built-in anti-microbial protection -- are made of scraps from Silestone quartz countertops. They're available from Aya Kitchen Studio on Richmond Road and other locations, and cost roughly \$140 to \$160 a square foot installed.

IceStone countertops are a new offering at the Healthiest Home & Building Supplies on Holland Avenue. Containing upward of 75-per-cent recycled glass and concrete, they count toward LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. The company also produces other sustainably manufactured interior surface products and exterior pavers.

FLOORING

EcoTimber's Woven-Bamboo flooring (about \$6.60 a square foot) is the latest rage in the increasingly popular bamboo market. California-based EcoTimber uses only mature bamboo plants grown without pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers and eschews urea-formaldehyde glues. That contrasts sharply with some bamboo flooring, especially from China, which reportedly uses immature plants and toxic glues.

The whole business of sustainable wood products is fraught with potential abuse, says John-David Hutchison, manager of the Healthiest Homes which carries EcoTimber products. "It might have an FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) label," he cautions, "but then they use toxic glues or finishes."

Again, you'll have to rely on your retailer or reputable green guides in buying sustainable bamboo. "It takes us days of research sometimes to ensure a product is really what it claims to be," says Hutchison.

LAWNS

If you bring your old, pollution-happy gas lawnmower to Home Depot before April 27, you'll get a rebate toward an environmentally healthier machine or other eco-friendly lawn products. That new lawnmower could even be the solar-powered Solaris Cordless, available online (www.home depot.ca). At \$818 including solar charger for the 21-inch model, it cuts up to a quarter acre on a single charge.

Find more eco-friendly products at the Ottawa Eco-Stewardship Fair today from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the RA Centre, 2451 Riverside Dr. Admission is free.

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