



the Natural life

Do you remember *The Graduate*? The 1967 movie starring Dustin Hoffman as Benjamin, a callow young college graduate unsure of his future, has one of its funniest moments when a business executive counsels the youth on his career choice by offering a single, perplexing word—"plastics."

That line is an apt summation of modern life, in which many of us have precious little contact with nature. To some extent, that's not a bad thing; few folks would give up, say, central heating or indoor plumbing. But the effort to insulate ourselves from the natural world's rhythms and cycles has not come without a price. "The creation and widespread use of man-made synthetic chemicals in the late 20th century has resulted in every region of the planet being contaminated with a dangerous cocktail of known health-damaging toxins," says Dr. Paula Baillie-Hamilton, author of *Toxic Overload* (Avery/Penguin). And that price includes a tag; the Organic Trade Association (OTA) reports that the environmental costs of recommended pesticide use run an estimated \$9 billion a year in the US.

No wonder individuals from all walks of life have decided that there's got to be a better way, a sentiment that has given rise to the organic movement. Much of that effort has gone, naturally enough, into food (see "Going Organic" on page 20 and Cooking Corner on page 18), including growing your own produce (see "Gearing Up

By Lisa James

Living the organic lifestyle only starts with what you eat. There is much more to it—from clothing to cosmetics to cleaners—as natural options can make your entire environment a healthier, safer place.

for Gardening” on page 34). But eating organic is only part of the story; the OTA says that sales of non-food items—including fiber goods, household cleaning, personal care and pet food—grew almost 20% in 2003.

The organic movement is part of an ongoing shift in worldview from what’s-in-it-for-me to what’s-best-for-us, a change that authors David Rippe and Jared Rosen call *The Flip* (Hampton Roads Publishing). They claim that our plasticized existence is actually a world upside down in which “people have lost their intimate connection to the whole” and that individuals are now “flipping” into a right side up world, in which all facets of a person’s existence are interconnected and integrated. These flipped folks, sometimes dubbed “cultural creatives,” are, say Rippe and Rosen, “motivated by concern for all the people of the planet and all the *living systems* of the planet.”

Part of that concern revolves around being an aware, conscious consumer; as Rippe and Rosen put it, “Living in the Right Side Up world requires being responsible for your actions—all of them.” Buying natural products not only enhances health—both your own and the planet’s—but also feels good on a deeper, more intuitive level.

Wearable Organics

The best place to start raising your awareness is in your clothes closet. Conventional cotton production is hard on the environment; according to the OTA, 55 billion pounds of insecticides were used on US cotton crops in 2003, plus a whole lot of synthetic fertilizer. In fact, it takes a third of a pound of chemicals to produce one cotton T-shirt—something to think about the next time you pass that undershirt and tighty-whities display in the men’s department. While not as chemical-drenched as cotton, conventionally raised wool also requires a lot of insecticides, some of which have been linked to nervous-system disorders in workers exposed to them (and presumably

have not been doing the sheep any favors, either).

While not yet produced in mass quantities, more and more organic cotton and wool, as certified under guidelines established by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), is coming onto the market. In 2003, organic fiber sales rose by more than 22%, while sales of organic women’s wear grew by more than 33%.

Chemical concerns explain why natural children’s apparel, including diapers, is another growing trend. “People do tend to think, ‘I don’t really want chemicals in a disposable diaper next to my baby’s skin,’” says Leah Carter, owner of Better for Babies in Carrollton, Georgia, which specializes in organic diapers and baby slings. She says that often starts a chain reaction: “They go to cloth diapers, then to organic cloth, and



Starting from the bottom: Organic diapers mean fewer chemicals next to baby, less volume in landfills.

somewhere in that process they learn about how pesticides in these crops affect the environment and the workers who are involved in making the product.” (Some of Carter’s diapers combine organic cotton and hemp, a fashionable natural fiber that isn’t often certified organic but is generally grown with minimal chemical input in any case.)

That interest in the wider world beyond one’s own immediate surroundings is a driving force behind Maggie’s Organics of Ypsilanti, Michigan, which specializes in women’s wear, especially socks and tights; that’s why the company uses a women’s cooperative in Nicaragua to handle most of its sewing needs. “It’s hip to be into organics,” says development coordinator Mary

Buchanan. “It’s more of a revolution in the economy.” For example, Maggie’s is developing a line of organic cotton baby clothes using “designs based on the cooperative’s need to eliminate some of their waste” and that employ low-toxin inks.



Socking it to pesticides: Regular cotton soaks up tons of bugkillers, making organic cotton a wise choice.

Natural fibers are not just good for you and the rest of the world; they’re also just more comfy. (Who hasn’t experienced the plastic-bag effect of wearing polyester on a hot day?) “Active” fibers (natural and preferably organic) breathe, provide ventilation to the body, absorb moisture, maintain body temperature and expand or contract with humidity,” says Annie Bond, a natural living authority and the author of *Home Enlightenment* (Rodale Books). “They don’t mildew or attract dust mites as readily as synthetic fibers.” (Wool does draw moths, but they can be shooed away with cedar instead of mothballs.) Bond also favors two other natural fibers: “Linen is the perfect hot-weather fabric because it absorbs 20% or more of its weight in water. Silk is a wonderful choice for elegance.”

The interest in keeping natural stuff next to your skin includes personal care items as well. Herbie Calves, marketing director at Kiss My Face in Gardiner, New York, makers of soaps, moisturizers and other products, says the natural end of the market is growing at 15% to 20% a year, compared with 1% for traditional health and beauty aids. “Consumers are trying for the ‘best odds’ lifestyle—living the healthiest you possibly can,” he says. “They feel better when they use organic and natural products.” And the environmental aspect isn’t

inconsiderable: For example, a woman can use up to 12,000 disposable feminine hygiene products in her lifetime, which represents a lot of landfill space, and those products often contain dioxin, a toxic byproduct of the bleaching process. "There's a certain ripple effect in supporting the environment and organic farmers who don't have to use hundreds of pounds of pesticides on hundreds of acres of farmland," says Calves.



Feel good about looking good: Natural personal care (shampoo, etc.) is another hot market trend.

Home, Natural Home

After food and clothing, shelter is the next step in the natural progression. Some forecasters see a world in which all houses are clean and green, built with recycled materials, maintained using environmentally friendly products and surrounded by organically tended gardens and landscaping.

Sounds swell, but where does one start? "One rule is to choose the least toxic product every time you go to buy something," says Bond. "The second would be to choose the most inert ingredient whenever you can—the product that smells the least. Just use your common sense." For most folks, she recommends doing it a step at a time, replacing synthetic materials with natural alternatives as what you have runs out.

The most important things to ditch, according to Bond, are pesticides: "They're meant to kill; they can make people very sick." It's an understandable reaction from someone who

started leading the natural life in 1980 after she was poisoned by pesticides, which left her unable to tolerate many of the chemicals prevalent in modern products.

Cleaners run a close second on Bond's ditch list. "My experience is that you don't need a chemical arsenal to clean the house," she says. "The products you buy in health food

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stores are very good.” (If you want to scare yourself silly, put the products you now use into the search engine at www.scorecard.org to learn how toxic they really are.) It’s especially important to avoid conventional dry cleaning. “No one should have dry-cleaned clothes in their closet,” Bond warns. “The chemicals waft into the room and you sleep amid them every night.” Fortunately, a growing number of establishments are moving towards less toxic dry-cleaning methods.

If you really want to safeguard your sleep, Bond suggests turning to natural bedding materials. “Sleeping under organic wool comforters and blankets is deeply regenerative,” she says, noting that the electrostatic charge (the little shock you get from touching some items, especially in colder weather) that builds up on synthetic fibers generates positive ions. Natural fibers give rise to negative ions, which “you want to surround you when you

sleep because they promote healing.”

Don’t forget the bed itself. Michael Penny, co-owner of North Star Beds in Fredericktown, Ohio, got into the organic bedding business after his wife’s migraine headaches cleared up when she bought an organic pillow. “I learned that the chemicals in mattresses wind up in our bodies,” he says. “People shouldn’t pay thousands of dollars for a green house and then sleep on a chemical mattress.” That’s why North Star uses organic cotton and wool on top of natural rubber, which Penny says would be certified organic if the USDA’s standards included rubber as a category.

Living in a green house isn’t as farfetched as it sounds; people are actually building houses from the ground up using recycled and ecologically responsible materials. But even the traditional house or apartment you’re in can move into a more natural mode. When you repaint, look for low-VOC (volatile



Organics are everywhere: The push for a more natural lifestyle is being felt on all fronts, even in footwear.

expensive to start with, its ability to wear so well makes up the difference and more.” Other choices include coir (taken from coconut husks), cotton, jute and sisal.

Even decorative items can be viewed through a natural lens. For instance, as lovely as candlelight is, conventional candles often produce soot, which can leave its smudgy traces on not only your home furnishings but on your lungs as well. Candles made from beeswax, bayberry or soy are just as beautiful and a lot healthier.

All in all, there’s never been a better time to go organic. “When I got sick in 1980 there were very few items on the market,” Bond says. “The difference between then and now is just mind-boggling. Living a natural lifestyle is just making a decision to do it.” Welcome to the right side up world. ■

ETip

Keep It Clean, Keep It Green

Spring cleaning doesn’t have to mean scrubbing down your domicile with a ton of toxins. To find 485(!) ways to cleanse everything from walls to shower curtains, check out Annie Bond’s *Clean & Green: The Complete Guide to Nontoxic and Environmentally Safe Housekeeping* (Ceres Press). Who thought housework could be so hip?



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organic compound) or no-VOC paints to steer clear of toxic fumes; the fact that these paints are water-based, which makes thinning and cleaning easier, is a bonus.

Conventional carpeting is another potential headache—literally. Bond says that a number of the chemicals found in carpeting, especially in the backing, are nerve toxins that can cause headaches and concentration problems. She recommends using such natural flooring materials as wood, slate or ceramic tile; in places where you really want something soft and warm on the floor, pesticide-free wool is best: “Even though wool is