

sense and sustainability

by lisa and ron beres

train and trust your senses to create a home that is healthy for you and the environment



It's impossible to wake up each day in America and not hear something from somewhere about the environment, either how we are destroying it or how we can save it. While the very real concerns associated with climate change, global warming and carbon emissions dominate much of the coverage devoted to our society's slow yet steady acknowledgment of its environmental responsibility, the idea of sustainability encompasses a much larger set of concerns that affect every person in every household worldwide. More than just the sexy catchphrase of the moment, sustainability means that the way we live now will not hinder the environment from sustaining and renewing itself once we are gone. It means that our actions and our lifestyles have a neutral, if not beneficial, impact on the earth and its systems. While driving hybrids, using energy-efficient appliances and utilizing alternative energy sources like solar and wind-generated electricity all have positive effects on the health of the environment, they only address a portion of the aspects of our cultural lifestyle that have the potential to hinder the earth from sustaining and renewing its systems and its health. Change begins at home, and there is no more direct way for us to impact the earth's sustainability than through the choices we make with regard to the place where we have the most control: our own homes.

The industrial "can-do" spirit of the 20th century placed tremendous value on progress, innovation and convenience. As a result, we, as consumers, value things that are new, and we expect a certain standard of ease and durability. We generally don't give a lot of thought to how it's achieved, as long as the results are there, and the way we perceive those results is through our five senses. If things look, sound, taste, feel and smell the way we expect them to, then we tend to be satisfied. If we're in a hurry to get out the door in the morning and we spill coffee on a crisp white shirt, we rinse it with chlorine bleach and expect that stain to disappear, or we take the shirt to the dry cleaner and trust that it will come back looking and smelling like new, although we're not sure how it happens. We've become accustomed to and even take comfort in the smell and feel of new sheets, new carpet or freshly painted walls, which all represent newness, freshness and something that is unspoiled, yet we're not sure where that smell comes from. We derive peace of mind from the air fresheners and cleansers that we scour our kitchens and bathrooms with—the ones our mothers used—secure in the knowledge that we are killing the germs and bacteria that threaten our health. The fragrances from these cleansers, sprays and detergents are our signal that our clothes and homes are clean and safe.

Naturally, there's a catch. In our quest for the results we want, we're realizing that there are some additional, less desirable results that come along with the ones we prize. We're learning that many of the products and services we use to freshen and clean our homes, clothes and bodies can be more dangerous to our health and to the environment than the stains, germs and bacteria they aim to eliminate. Many of the items we purchase to furnish and beautify our homes are manufactured using practices and materials that are detrimental to the environment, the consumers who purchase them and the workers who produce them. In short, the days when we could blindly enjoy the conveniences we've derived from our years of progress have passed, and we must now acknowledge the bigger picture of how our choices and actions at home impact the environment's ability to sustain itself.

The Five Senses at Home

Since our senses are our most important guides in the decisions we make with regard to the homes we create for ourselves, it is important for us to be aware of the impact of the products and services we consume. The good news is that living sustainably doesn't mean that we have to give up the conveniences and comforts we have come to rely on. It does mean that we must put a little more energy into gathering knowledge and retraining our senses to perceive the difference between what is healthy and what is unhealthy, for ourselves and for the planet.

Touch

When we think of touch with regard to our homes, the first things that come to mind are textures, fabrics and anything that provides us with tactile stimulation. This includes furniture, clothing, draperies, sheets, pillows, mattresses, blankets, comforters, towels and more. When it comes to furniture and fabrics, we all want to satisfy our stylistic tastes and create aesthetically pleasing homes. However, many of the items that we love because they feel so nice can expose us to harmful chemicals, both through the finished product as well as the manufacturing process used to produce them. One of the big concerns with home products is the presence of volatile organic compounds. VOCs are potentially harmful gasses that are emitted when a product contains chemical compounds that have high vapor pressures at room temperature, causing the chemicals to vaporize and enter the atmosphere. When this occurs indoors, the vapors can build up and reach dangerous levels, resulting in the possibility of respiratory problems and some cancers. For instance, many people are unaware that formaldehyde, a prevalent VOC, is a common ingredient in adhesives and finishes used in the production of many conventional home furnishings and fabrics.

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Fumes can enter indoor air from furniture made of plywood, particleboard, fiberboard and linens treated with wrinkle-free or wrinkle resistant finishes. Formaldehyde is a known carcinogen according to the World Health Organization, and one of the most common indoor air pollutants. It's worth finding out from retailers whether the furnishings we purchase contain chemicals like formaldehyde, and it usually only takes a little digging to find out.

The same holds true for the fabrics in our homes. The production of cotton accounts for more pesticide use than any other segment of agriculture worldwide. These pesticides wreak havoc on the delicate ecosystems where they are sprayed, damage the health of the farmers and field workers who cultivate it and end up contaminating vast supplies of drinking water and soil. Plus, those pesticides remain in the cotton fibers even after they've been woven into that crisp white shirt or those comfy boxer briefs. Only fabrics that are labeled 100% organic are produced without these toxic chemicals and without a destructive impact on the environment.

It's been estimated that we spend up to one third of our lives in our bedrooms. Mattresses are required by law to have flame-retardant chemicals, many of which release a host of harmful VOCs as well as chemicals that can be absorbed through the skin. There are two ways to avoid this: One was is to obtain a doctor's prescription to purchase a mattress without harsh chemicals. The second, much easier solution is to replace your old mattress with an organic mattress that meets the flammability requirements. The organic wool in these mattresses acts as a natural flame retardant, making it a naturally healthier option.

Not only does this create a safe sleeping area, but if this mattress ends up in a landfill someday, it won't leach toxic chemicals into the soil or water.

Thus, when it comes time to replace towels, draperies, bedding, even children's toys, or when it's time to redecorate, we can make a tremendous difference in the safety of our homes and sustainability of the environment by simply taking the time to look for non-toxic materials such as 100% organic fabrics, water-based glues, natural latex foam, hemp, natural wool batting, natural fibers, linens, wools and fabrics washed with environmentally friendly detergents that are not covered up in toxic stains and finishes. Look for finishes made with water-based glues, natural beeswax, organic oils and certified or unfinished wood and formaldehyde-free resins. In addition, purchasing Forest Stewardship Council certified furniture ensures that the wood is harvested from responsibly managed forests.

Smell

Sometimes our noses can be our best friends when they tell us a smell is not *right*. Learning to pay attention to what we smell in our homes and recognizing the odors that represent potential dangers to our health and the environment is worth hours of Internet research on home pollutants.

By now most of us have probably heard that indoor air, on average, is more polluted than outdoor air. Since most Americans spend up to 90% of their time indoors, this is a cause for concern. One of the most popular ways of bringing fresh air into our homes is by using air fresheners and scented candles. But do we really smell fresh air inside our tightly sealed homes when we use air fresheners or scented candles? Don't be fooled by marketing gimmicks suggesting air fresheners provide a healthy, fresh scent. Like many fragrance products, air fresheners are created with any

of over 3,000 synthetic chemical ingredients, and they don't actually eliminate the source of any odors. Scented candles are also a concern because some of them release VOCs and create airborne toxins that can pose dangers to unborn babies and young children. In cases of imported candles containing lead wicks, the dangers are even greater because of the tiny airborne particles they release, and these particles can build up over time in the body. Choose unscented candles or those with 100% nontoxic essential oils as their source of scent. Other things to look for on the label include 100% vegetable or soybean oils, and avoid petroleum and paraffin. The key is to make sure what you smell is natural and not synthetic (see fpinva.org for more info on the toxicity of fragrances). It's also a great idea to allow fresh air in on a consistent basis and increase the amount of

airflow in the home. Air fresheners and candles that give off synthetic fragrances of the outdoors or floral scents are no substitute for the real thing.

Taste

There is nothing like a cold glass of water on a hot day. However, a recent article in the Journal of Water and Health estimates that on average, there were 17 drinking water outbreaks per year from 1991 to 2002 in the United States. In addition to outbreaks, some public health officials have recognized and are concerned with the importance of non-outbreak waterborne risks as well. The potential contaminants are many: perchlorate, arsenic, lead and pathogens to name a few. Some of the culprits are biological in nature, while others like perchlorate, a contaminant from rocket fuel that has found its way into some public water systems, are derived from chemicals. It's not just the contaminants that taint our

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more pesticide use
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water, but also the fluoride and chlorine that most water filtration plants treat our water with. Information about what's in your city's tap water is available at the Environmental Working Group's Web site ewg.org/tapwater/yourwater. There are a variety of water home test kits that could be used to determine some common biological and chemical contaminants for homes as well.

When choosing a water filtration system for the home, it is a matter of taste, both aesthetically and literally. There are many things to consider. Before treating or filtering drinking water in the home, there needs to be a clear understanding of what contaminants are in the water, if any, in order to choose the most appropriate filter. The most common are carbon filters, reverse osmosis systems and ultraviolet light. Each one has its advantages and disadvantages. With most varieties of filters, you can choose between a whole house system or a faucet-mounted model, or even a filtered pitcher. Ideally, a whole house water filtration is best, but sink models are easier to install and require a smaller initial investment. Another important thing to point out when picking a whole house filter is that it also filters the bathing water of a home. But for a clean showering experience, there are also several excellent showerhead filters.

In addition to purifying our home's water, it's important to consider whether our cleaning products are in *good taste*. It may sound funny, but in essence we shouldn't clean our homes with products that we wouldn't ingest into our own bodies. When we clean, we and our families are breathing in the fumes from our cleaning products, and the ingredients will inevitably seep through the pores of our skin. In addition, all of those products, like bleach and other caustic chemicals, end up going down our drains and into the water, air and soil, ultimately damaging the environment.

We don't have to use the products that our mothers used in order to have clean homes. We can get great results from products that are made with natural ingredients and are biodegradable, meaning no solvents, no acids, no caustic chemicals, no bleach and no ammonia. Remember: Whatever we apply to the walls and floors of our home is going to eventually be applied to us. There are several great, healthy cleaning products available on the market today, and there are also some great recipes to make your own. Pick up *Clean & Green* by Annie Berthod-Bond for tips on natural cleaning, or see the sidebar for do-it-yourself recipes.

Sight

Gerbera daises, philodendrons and various other plants have the distinction of bringing both beauty and health into the home. According to studies conducted by NASA, philodendrons actually remove formaldehyde from the air, a common contaminant that off-gasses from particleboard, fabrics and other household products. Other plants remove benzene and ammonia while adding cheerfulness and texture to a space.

Carefully placed skylights and windows also improve the mood and well-being of a home's occupants. Sunlight's energy creates

ideal indoor climates for all seasons. Properly treated wood, slate and other natural flooring can have a positive aesthetic effect as well as a physical one when compared to synthetic alternatives. Most conventional vinyl flooring contains PVC, which as we know is a source of many harmful pollutants, in addition to the fact that it cannot be recycled and is not biodegradable. For those who still want to utilize carpeting, consider natural organic area rugs in combination with natural flooring. Both area rugs and hard flooring are easier to clean and maintain, and most wall-to-wall carpeting is packed with PVC. A clean home is not only visually pleasing, but healthier as well.

Sound

Does your home sound good? That may seem like an odd question, but believe it or not, noises in the home can disrupt the lives of people who live in them. More specifically, a home filled with appliances such as microwaves, TVs, electric alarm clocks, computers, stereo speakers and other electrical devices that give off strong electrical magnetic frequencies or microwaves could be wreaking havoc on the immune system of the people living there. It has been estimated that today we are exposed to 100 million times more electromagnetic radiation and microwaves than our grandparents. The home is supposed to be a sanctuary and place of rest, and the bedroom in particular should be a place of healing. Electronic devices like electric alarm clocks, televisions and cell-phone chargers, particularly in the bedroom, can disrupt sleeping patterns and the immune system over time. Even when these appliances are turned off, if they are still plugged into the electrical outlet, they are giving off electromagnetic radiation.

One method for solving this problem is to install an automatic disconnection/demand switch for the sleeping area. An automatic demand switch will shut off electricity at the fuse box, thus eliminating electric fields on a particular wiring circuit. If a switch is installed on a lighting circuit in the bedroom, the switch will automatically sense when the last light on that circuit is turned off at night. At this point the demand switch has determined there is no demand for electricity and turns off the electricity at the fuse box. Then there is no electricity present in the wires beyond the fuse box, thus eliminating electric fields on this wiring circuit until morning when you awake and switch on the lights, causing the demand switch to sense a demand for electricity, then automatically restores it to this circuit for normal operation.

Our homes are the physical representations of our inner selves—our second skin so to speak. An unhealthy home can be a reflection of our own inner thoughts and beliefs. Our homes are the one space in the world where we have the power to exercise control. Begin to create inner balance by creating a home that nourishes the body's senses, your family's health and the future of the planet.

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Remember This Acronym: N.E.S.T.

Naturalize: Choose natural products

Eliminate: Eliminate toxins whenever and wherever possible in your home.

Separate: When you cannot eliminate, choose to separate the toxin from direct exposure to you. For example, use a barrier cloth on a mattress or paint with a zero-VOC paint, like the ones from AFM (*afmsafecoat.com*) that actually create a barrier between you and the toxic substrate underneath.

Test: Hire a professional in extreme situations. There are also many do-it-yourself test kits which can be used for air, water, radon, lead, etc.

Suggestions for Cleaning Your Home Naturally:

Use: washing soda (cuts grease)

For: laundry, dusting aid, furniture polish

Use: essential oils (food grade)

For: scents for soap, detergent and all-purpose cleaner

Use: aromatic herbs

For: scents for soap, detergent and all-purpose cleaner

Use: lemon juice

For: toilet & bowl cleaner

Use: olive oil

For: dusting

Use: salt

For: silver polish

Use: toothpaste

For: silver polish

Use: baking soda

(odor-absorbing, deodorizing)

For: fabric softener, silver polish, tub and tile

Use: vinegar

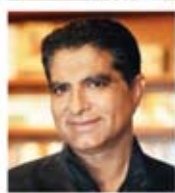
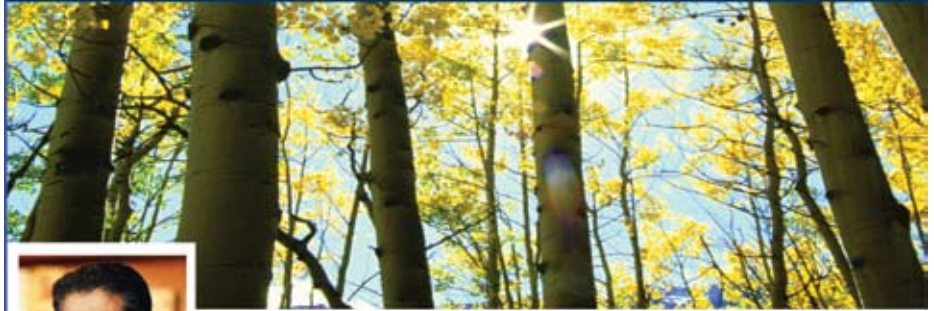
For: window cleaner

Use: borax (disinfects,

deodorizes, inhibits mold)

For: all-purpose cleaner, toilet & bowl, laundry

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