

Ten questions you need to ask about your green products

By Josh Abush

To be genuinely green, you need to cast a critical eye towards your products and separate the quality from the hype. Here are the best questions to ask about them.

1. Does the product or material match the lifespan of the design? How long will it be before the product you're installing gets torn out? What is the realistic design lifespan of say, a kitchen, bathroom, deck or paint job? Match your product to the overall lifespan of your design area if possible. One-hundred-year counters on 10 year cabinets? Not a green idea.

2. Does the product release harmful gases? Some products give off undesirable gases for a few hours after installation, some for years afterwards. If I have a choice between a product that gives off a high amount of harmful gases for one day, versus a small amount over 20 years, I'd likely choose the short duration, high concentration product. We can ventilate while we are working, or wear respirators, but a client or homeowner might not even know it is slowly releasing harmful chemicals over their lifetimes.

3. What is the environmental impact of producing the materials? All materials have varying degrees of environmental impact throughout their production, not just in their use. There are lots of resources out there to help you know which ones have the least impact. Many manufacturers now publish their product's life cycle energy costs. Take the time to learn what they are.

4. What is the impact on the installer/manufacturer of the product? I recently installed a type of engineered floor made up of thin (waste) strips of oak bonded to a core of more thin waste pieces. The install was glue-down with a low-VOC adhesive. Well, when I read the label, I found out the low-VOC, polyurethane adhesive product contained chemicals that "may give me difficulty breathing." Save the trees and kill me in the process? No thanks.

5. What's wrong with comparable "non-green" products? Sometimes traditional materials are the most suitable green products out there. I like tar-paper, for instance, on the outside of buildings. I like solid lumber because, in many cases, it performs better. The marketing says green is better, but sometimes better is what you have been using since you were a kid.

6. What happens at the end of the product's life? Can I recycle the recycled product I've just installed, or have I just spread glue all over it and contaminated it? Concrete and tile can be recycled, but can my new, bulletproof, water-proof shower with a plastic liner? Can I recycle the plastic pipe I've just put in, or should I have used copper. I mean, have you ever seen copper hang around in a dumpster for long?

7. Can I spend my money elsewhere and get better value? Don't blow your client's budget on green materials and skimp or leave yourself without enough to do a good quality job. Good quality means longer lasting, and longer lasting has green qualities all its own.

8. What are the durability & maintenance issues? I love low-flow toilets that use very little water, but not those that make you clean the smears after every use. How much detergent and water are we using on our poorly designed low-flow toilets?

9. How long has the product been around? How much do we really know about it? Paper studies, simulated aging tests, projected life expectancies and laboratory tests are sometimes no substitute for long-term proven field performance.

10. Why am I drawn to this material? Be honest. Do you want to use the product because it is new and sexy? There are some new in-style materials that are genuinely safer and faster for us to work with, are less likely to make our clients sick, and are gentler on the planet. Use them if they fit within your green budget. There are many other products that are or may fall victim to green hype and style. Use these ones carefully because, while they may be in style now, in five or 10 years they may end up in the same place as shag carpet, woodgrain-printed panelling and UFFI insulation.

Finally, remember, these questions have to be taken in the larger context of the project you are working on. If your design and layout stinks or your workmanship is poor, a green material won't help you cover it up. **CC**

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