

Going Green

Organic products have come a long way from their crunchy, farm-stand origins. But, asks Christine Lennon, do they really make a difference?

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Vogue October 2006

The most memorable fight I've had with my husband (then boyfriend) was about natural toothpaste. I'll deliver the highlights: Andrew- an NRDC supporting, hybrid-car-driving environmentalist of the first order- was "choked" by the way I "mangled" the tube. It was aluminum, I argued, and while plastic-lined aluminum is recyclable and the most environmentally sensitive choice (according to Tom- you know- Tom from Maine), it's hard to squeeze and prone to messy leaks, and ... and ... in one uncontrollable blurt, the truth came out.

"I hate natural toothpaste!"

There, I said it. It tasted a little chalky, nowhere near the extreme-clean minty explosion I'd grown to expect, if not exactly love, I said. Also on the hate list: the all-natural shower gel that smelled like rotting mangoes, and the altogether useless shampoo and conditioner (that left my hair feeling parched and snarled, despite the label's promises) stocked in his shower. I also revealed that for months I'd been sneaking around with my expensive, distinctly un-natural conditioner on the side. So there. And in one defiant gesture, I brought my dermatologist approved cleanser with its litany of polysyllabic, environmentally unfriendly ingredients out of the cabinet and placed it, firmly, sinkside. The not-so-sub subtext: Love me, love my products.

But that was three years ago, not long after I'd moved to Los Angeles from New York. I'd never been a fan of natural cosmetics and skin care. It all seemed a little crude and, to be frank, hygienically suspect. Instead, I favored the sleek glamour of department-store products with their pristine packages and vaguely French names. Though I've always eaten organically whenever possible (and even agreed to a discreet composter for our

veggie scraps hidden in the side yard – the husband’s idea), when it came to preventing split ends and wrinkles, I believed that a blast of the latest high-tech cocktail promised seriously scientific reinforcement and measurable results. I’d interviewed the Shalom Harlows of the world, those serene, Earth-loving models who would name a no-frills Dr. Houschka remedy or a wholesome, if slightly greasy, moisturizer as their latest beauty obsession. But could the credit for their glowing skin be given to the gently farmed essential oils anointing it, or was it perfect to begin with? I remained both cynic and skeptic.

Here in Los Angeles – where eighties diesel Mercedes that run on “Grassolean” make every intersection smell like French fries – the pressure to embrace eco lifestyle and shop for organic moisturizer alongside Cameron Diaz at the natural-food market was significant. Biodynamic brands like Germany’s Weleda and Australia’s Jurlique crept into style. It was easy to dismiss them as props for fashion’s haut hippie movement, and for a while I did. At the time I was aware of neither the advancements in the organic-beauty trade nor the recent research about cosmetic chemistry and the frightening impact of certain ingredients on the environment- all of which suggests it’s high time we start paying attention to what we slather on our skin and rinse down the drain.

“I worry about where the ingredients are coming from and where they’re going.” Says Joshua Onysko, founder of Boulder-based Pangea Organics, a slickly packaged, affordable, and altogether impressive “ecocentric body-care” company.

“At first, when I hung a banner outside my salon that said ORGANIC HAIR CARE, people would laugh.” Says John Masters, the Manhattan hairdresser and natural-product pioneer who has operated a “clean-air” salon with ammonia-free hair color in SoHo since 1994. “Now nobody’s laughing. Our skin absorbs what we put on it. It’s been proven. Every day we eat chemicals. We breathe them. It’s just not necessary.”

What, specifically, is all the fuss about? Why do organic-cosmetics makers pay tens of thousands of dollars for certification to assure their customers that they are not using any

of the hundreds of cosmetic ingredients that are suspected of causing harm – and how real are the risks?

Here's what we know: Parabens, common preservatives that I guarantee are in at least one of your most treasured products, are believed by many, especially in the European Union, to alter hormone function, increasing the risk of certain cancers and infertility. Propylene glycol, a common moisturizing agent, is also a main ingredient in antifreeze and brake fluid. Phthalates are fixatives, plasticizers, and solvents that help fragrance last longer and nail polish transform from liquid to hard enamel. It is believed by some that exposure to this chemical can affect the development of reproductive organs in developing boys in utero. We spray it on in the form of perfume, with an alcohol base that helps it penetrate the skin and enter the bloodstream. In other products, it's usually just listed on the label as "fragrance." Do you see DEA, TEA, or MEA on that ingredient list? A 1998 National Toxicology Program study says these chemicals can affect hormone function. Petrolatum, and almost all of the conventional creamy waxes used in makeup, are petroleum by-products (so driving a Prius and piling on the lip gloss may be at cross-purposes). The average shower gel, once it's used and washed down the drain, takes 300 years to biodegrade.

A toxicologist from the Environmental Working Group took an established list of potentially harmful ingredients (culled from the US government and a division of the World Health Organization, among other sources) and cross-referenced it with a sampling of products. He found parabens, phthalates and n-nitrosamines (a suspected carcinogen) present in nearly 7,500 products. After some urging from the Breast Cancer Fund, the National Environmental Trust, and the Campaign for Sage Cosmetics, a California state law was recently passed requiring cosmetics manufacturers to disclose any product ingredient that is on state or federal lists of chemicals that cause cancer or birth defects. More than 200 companies have signed the Compact for Safe Cosmetics, pledging to meet the (in some cases more stringent) standard set by the EU and to not include chemicals that are known or strongly suspected of causing cancer, mutations, or

birth defects. Pevonia, Burt's Bees, Weleda, Pharmocopia, Naturopathica, and Pangea Organics are among the companies who've signed.

What do you use every day? Cleanser, shampoo, conditioner, body lotion, moisturizer with sunscreen, foundation, lip-gloss, mascara, perfume? If there's a trace of a questionable chemical in any of each of these things, what does that add up to in a month, or a lifetime? Pamela Bailey, president and CEO of the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Fragrance Association (CTFA), says, "It is federal law that a company cannot manufacture a product without data that guarantee that the product is safe. There are many studies before an ingredient makes it into a product." On controversial subjects like parabens, Bailey stresses how important it is "to look at the body of scientific evidence, not just individual, isolated studies." Of phthalates, she says, "There are many phthalates; those used in medical products are not the same phthalates that are used in nail polish." She refers to the Cosmetic Ingredient Review body- a board of experts culled from around the world whose conclusions are published in peer-reviewed journals- and notes that response papers addressing the CTFA's stance on specific issues are posted on the organization's Web site, ctfa.org. So no one is intentionally hiding toxic waste in your lipstick. But not that I've read this stuff and heard some reasonably well informed people talk about the potential danger, even a cynic like me can't ignore it.

Still, determining what is and isn't technically organic can be tricky. Due to trends as much as good intentions, the word *organic* has lately been slapped on everything from wine bottles to bed linens and, as a consequence, has taken a bit of a beating. In terms of growing produce and raising livestock, organic farming is about soil management and crop rotation, making sure that no noxious chemicals like pesticides or synthetic fertilizers are used. The organic movement beyond the farming community advocates ecologically sound processing; using ingredients that are easily sustainable and don't strain the world's resources is also part of the M.O.

When it comes to beauty products, things get complicated. According to USDA regulations, a certified-organic product must contain 95 percent organic ingredients,

which is virtually impossible since water is the main ingredient in most formulas, and water cannot be organic. Even organic-cosmetics manufacturers admit that to call a cosmetic product 100 percent organic is a stretch- especially when you consider the amount of processing required to whip up the creamy consistency we expect. There will almost always be an ingredient on the label that's hard to pronounce, because without it most products would have the cosmetic appeal of salad dressing.

Jack Davies, founder of the Collective Wellbeing brand sold at Whole Foods, "calls out" organic ingredients like sweet orange and lemongrass on the labels of his shampoos, hand creams, and face masks but is careful not to claim that any on product is certified organic. "Apples and oranges can be certified organic. Products that are manufactured and sit on a shelf for two years were never meant to be certified organic," he says. "If you want a 100 percent natural beauty project, let me give you a recipe and you can make it yourself. Keep it in the fridge and throw it away after a week. If you want a shampoo that foams or a body lotion that doesn't grow rancid after two weeks, expect to see complex ingredients on the list."

That's not to say that products that avoid potentially harmful synthetics and use natural ingredients and organic "whenever possible" aren't beneficial. At the very least, they're a step in the right direction. Aveda has been at the forefront of sustainable, plant-based beauty since the late seventies, though the company makes no organic claims and uses some synthetics. Many small companies that source their ingredients from family-owned farms can't afford to have their factories evaluated and machinery retrofitted in order to be officially USDA-certified. There's the family in Madagascar that distills "the most beautiful vanilla" for Naturopathica, and Brickhouse Soap's Lisa Devo and Shannon Burtch, who harvest their organic herbs on a friend's farm in Upstate New York. The wild-crafted (grown in the wild, harvested by hand) oils from Argentina that Red Flower's Yael Alkalay uses in her Jasmine Grandiflorum conditioner wouldn't necessarily make the cut, either, but she is in the midst of reformulating her plant-powered Flower Skin line to meet organic standards and is developing an

environmentally friendly bath-and-body line for the Harmony Hotel, a Coast Rican eco-resort run by two surfers.

Louise Galvin, the London-based colorist to Sophie Dahl, Patsy Kensit, and Kylie Minogue, sold her car to pay for the purest natural ingredients when she started her color-safe hair-care line, Sacred Locks, two-and-a-half years ago. She replaced synthetic perfumes with citrus aromatherapy oils, and “horrible” propylene glycol with vegetable glycerin. “Even if the link between these ingredients and cancer hasn’t been 100 percent proven, I thought if I could find a better preservative alternative, I should,” she says. “I use grapefruit-seed extract instead of parabens, and it works beautifully.”

In recent years, as the organic movement has started to gain serious steam, not only has the technology evolved – new formulas are far more refined than their crunchy, I-made-this-in-my-backyard predecessors; product offerings are more diverse – but the overall image has dramatically traded up, too.

When Jo Wood, wife of Rolling Stones guitarist Ronnie wood, set out to create a range of organic ayurvedic bath and body care last year, packaging – luxury packaging – was a chief concern. She wanted to make things that her friends would want to buy and that she would want to use. “I designed my bottles to look like the antique glass you see at flea markets,” she says. “I wanted something sexy and beautiful that smelled good.”

Boutique apothecaries and specialty stores have caught on and are now stocking their shelves with upscale organic lines from France’s Patyka – elegant skin care and even perfume, in scents like Ambré and Hespéridé – to hair care from LA stylist Jamal Hammadi, who likes to say he tests products like his organic Shea Hair Cream “on actresses” – Naomi Watts, Kirsten Dunst, Drew Barrymore – “never on animals.” Weleda spiffed up Skin Food, the culty sesame-and-almond-oilcure-all that’s been around since 1926, repackaging it in an eye-popping green tube. Galvin’s shampoos and conditioners (top sellers and Bergdof Goodman and Saks), with their old-Fashioned labels, works as well as, and look better than, nearly anything else on the prestige market.

Luxury-minded converts like me can also take refuge at the all-things-organic Saffronrouge.com. It's run by Canadian Kirstin Binder, who assumes the role of your Earth-conscious best friend, only she advises you from afar via her posh little Web site. Binder claims she can recommend effective organic products that will work for anybody, and made good on her promise by sending me a sample of Primavera's Natural Balance Eye Renewal treatment. So far she's right. And as a result of my field research, our shower has never smelled better. But I do have a tube of Colgate squirreled away under the sink – just in case of emergency.