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## Sustainably Stylish Home Relax into Nurturing Furnishings

by April Thompson

**W**e all relish a cozy nest, whether that means light-filled views, the embrace of form-fitting sofas and chairs or plush rugs that snuggle bare feet. A beautiful, comfortable home that reflects our personal style and embodies our values can be achieved by learning the origin of furnishings and investing in sustainably made pieces that will stand the test of time, say experts.

"Furnishing a home ethically doesn't mean sacrificing comfort or style," says JD Doliner, a business consultant in Charlotte, North Carolina. Doliner's home is graced with 18th- and 19th-century antiques, organic cotton mattresses, comfy custom-made chairs from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified wood and handmade wool rugs certified child-labor-free by GoodWeave. "They give me peace of mind as a humanitarian and environmentalist," she says.

### Signs of Progress

Debbie Hindman, marketing director for Associates III Interior Design, in Denver, is working with increasingly knowledgeable clients like Doliner asking for sustainably sourced products. Manufacturers, in turn, are upping transparency about product origins, realizing it can provide a competitive edge, she notes.

"We look at the story behind a product and make sure that it aligns with both our company's and clients' values," says Hindman, a co-author of *Sustainable Residential Interiors*. "We ask questions like, 'Are workers paid a fair wage? Was the product made with local materials? What is the story behind the company's founding?'"

The Sustainable Furnishings Council (SFC) coalition of manufacturers, retailers and designers partners with businesses and informs consumers to increase environmentally responsible choices in the marketplace. Its 400 members commit to sustainability and transparency in their business practices and submit an annual action plan showing such efforts. Headquartered in Edenton, North Carolina, the council strives to minimize industry carbon emissions and remove unsustainable materials and harmful chemical ingredients from residential and commercial furnishings.

"The residential furnishings industry frequently takes raw materials from one continent, processes and manufactures on another to be consumed on yet another, leaving a huge environmental footprint," says Susan Inglis, the council's executive director. As the third largest consumer of wood, these manufacturers bear significant responsibility for preserv-

ing the world's forest ecosystems and fighting deforestation, reports Inglis.

## Savvy Shoppers

To make informed decisions, furniture shoppers need to ask how, where, from what and by whom a potential purchase is made. Lisa Beres, a healthy home expert and former interior designer in Newport Coast, California, and author of *Just Green It!* advises not taking product claims at face value. Ask if the product has earned a certification like the Global Organic Textile Standard for fabrics or GreenGuard, which verifies low levels of chemical emissions.

Not all natural products are sustainably produced; cotton, for example, is one of the most heavily sprayed crops. Look for certified organic cotton as a responsible textile choice. Beres also suggests renewable fiber sources like bamboo or hemp. "Natural latex is a sound alternative to foam fillers, offering good support and dust mite resistance," says Beres.

Specific animal-based products like down feathers used in bedding can provoke allergies and be produced inhumanely, Beres cautions. Products certified to the Responsible Down Standard, which protects the well-being and welfare of geese tapped for their manufacture, offer a humane choice for fluffy down comforters.

Look for well-crafted furniture made from locally sourced, reclaimed

or FSC-certified wood instead of particleboard, which usually contains formaldehyde and may be made from unsustainably harvested wood.

Sustainable furnishings are both better for the planet and can make a home distinctive. Natural pieces like a countertop made from reclaimed, rough-hewn wood provide a unique beauty that mass-manufactured pieces can't match and also showcase the material's natural form and feeling.

Her firm promotes durable, timeless pieces over trendy furnishings that a client might discard in a few years. When it's time to retire a piece of furniture, find a new home for it, whether by donating to a charity or reselling through a consignment store.

While cutting corners on home furnishing choices can be tempting, especially when shopping on a budget, remember that today's quality pieces may become tomorrow's cherished heirlooms.

"Some will spend money on the latest gadget, but hesitate to invest in a great piece of furniture or a quality mattress they'll spend much of their life sitting or sleeping on," says Beres. "It's not a splurge; you're investing in your health and protecting Earth's precious resources. It all comes full circle."

*Connect with freelance writer April Thompson, of Washington, D.C., at [AprilWrites.com](http://AprilWrites.com).*

## Toxic Furnishings Alert

Today's mass-produced furniture may contain hidden chemicals such as formaldehyde-based adhesives, flame retardants and other volatile organic compounds (VOC) linked to serious health issues. Researchers from the Natural Resources Defense Council found 45 toxic chemicals in indoor dust, 10 of which were present in at least 90 percent of households sampled. "These chemicals enter the air as materials in the furnishings break down," explains healthy home expert Lisa Beres. "Because we spend an average of 90 percent of our lives indoors, the exposure to harmful chemicals is troubling."

Beres advises shoppers to be wary of synthetic fabrics, which not only consume nonrenewable resources like petroleum, but may also contain toxic dyes, heavy metals or chemicals like Teflon. Foam and other fillings in mattresses, sofas and chairs are often a hidden source of off-gassing VOCs.

The Sustainable Furnishing Council's seal of approval and member list at [SustainableFurnishings.org](http://SustainableFurnishings.org) are a good place to start to find companies committed to offering healthier alternatives that include transparency and responsibility in their manufacturing practices.