

Wednesday, August 22, 2007 - 12:00 AM

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EcoConsumer

Green but stylish choices for back-to-school shopping

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

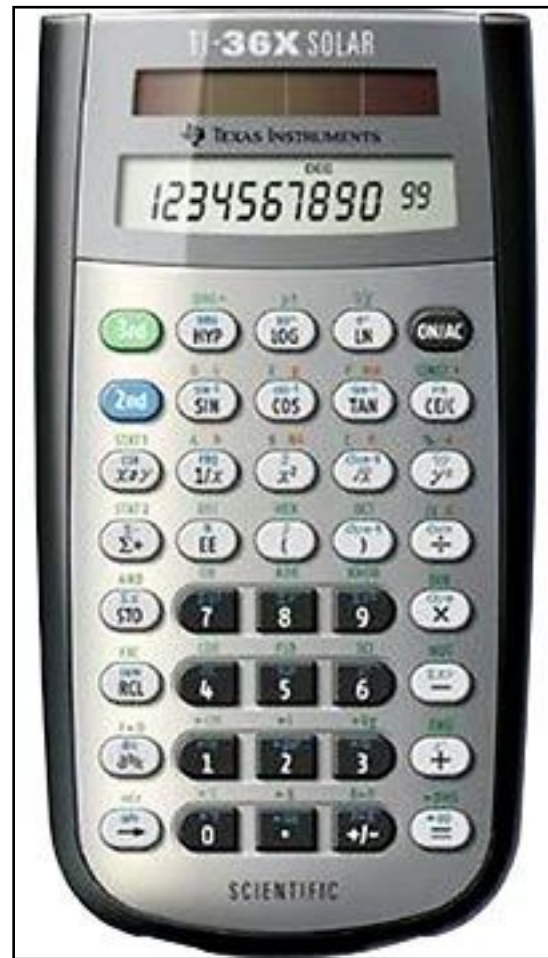
Many of us remember when preparing for the school year simply meant picking up a few new pencils and folders at the drugstore. But today, shopping for back-to-school supplies has evolved into a billion-dollar industry with a dazzling array of choices.

Fortunately, "green" school supplies have become more available as well.

Families with school-age children will spend an average of \$94 on back-to-school supplies this year, including notebooks, binders, writing instruments, backpacks and lunch boxes, according to a National Retail Federation survey. That amount has increased more than \$20 in just three years.

One way to reduce the environmental impact from back-to-school purchases, of course, is to buy less. Last year's supplies, or a sibling's old supplies, will often do just fine.

These days some teachers require students to use specific styles of notebooks, folders or other supplies. There may be no way to avoid buying those. But you can save money and time by waiting until after school starts to buy those types of items, so you can see



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Texas Instruments solar calculator.

teachers' supply lists and get exactly what you need.

When you do buy new back-to-school supplies, seek out safe, eco-friendly products. Here's an item-by-item guide:

Backpacks

Many children's backpacks are made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC, or vinyl). Production and disposal of vinyl have been linked to cancer and reproductive disorders. Consider instead backpacks made from polyester or nylon. REI has a large selection.

To make even more of a green statement, try a hemp backpack. Now more widely available, these can easily be found by searching online.

Lunchboxes

Vinyl also shows up in most soft insulated lunch boxes for kids. Two years ago, independent tests of vinyl lunch boxes found that a number of them contained high levels of lead. As a result, many manufacturers now have their products tested. If your child must have a vinyl lunchbox, buy only those labeled "lead-safe" or "lead-free."

The greenest approach: Avoid vinyl all together. Lunchboxes.com carries dozens of metal lunch boxes, including some you may remember fondly from your youth. Reusablebags.com stocks a number of alternative lunch totes and bags, including a few made from recycled plastic soda bottles.

Water bottles

Encourage your child to take a water bottle to school. Some teachers even require this now. Since we generally have good tap water in this region, you don't need to buy water in single-use plastic bottles. Invest in a reusable water bottle and wash it regularly.



REUSABLEBAGS.COM

Reusable water bottles from SIGG and Nalgene.

Unfortunately, many attractive, colored, reusable water bottles are made of polycarbonate plastic (most of these have the #7 recycling symbol on the bottom). Bisphenol-A, a chemical that may disrupt behavioral development, could leach into liquids in polycarbonate bottles, says the Institute for Children's Environmental Health.

Select a reusable water bottle made of metal, or non-leaching plastics such as high density polyethylene (HDPE, #2) or low density polyethylene (LDPE, #4). REI and Reusablebags.com offer many choices.

Binders and folders

The vast majority of binders have covers made from — guess what? — vinyl. If possible, select polyethylene binders instead. Often referred to on the label as "poly" binders, these usually weigh a little less and have no cover.

Also consider the Rebinder, an uncovered cardboard binder made from recycled paper by Sustainable Group, a local company. Rebinders and Repocket recycled-paper folders from Sustainable Group — all made in Seattle — can be found locally at University Book Store, Goods for the Planet, Queen Anne Office Supply and Paperhaus.

Pencils

Many office-supply stores stock a large selection of colorful or high-tech-looking mechanical pencils, which should last longer than traditional pencils. For fans of standard pencils, industry leader Dixon Ticonderoga makes many of its pencils from sustainably-harvested wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

Notebooks and paper

Buy paper and notebooks with recycled content whenever possible. Brands offering recycled-paper



REUSABLEBAGS.COM

notebooks include Mead, Blueline, GBC and Foray.

Calculators

Most basic calculators today use a combination of solar and battery power. But Casio and Texas Instruments offer all-solar models that never need batteries. These can be found at selected office supply or electronics stores, or online.

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Eco-friendly lunch bags from Cool Totes.



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