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EcoConsumer

The benefits of green carpeting, in any color

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

You're shopping for a new carpet. The right color? Check. The right amount of cushiness? Check. But what about off-gassing, dust-retention, toxics used in manufacturing and disposal problems?

The carpet industry and governments have taken a closer look the past few years at the health and environmental effects of carpeting. As a result, you can now take advantage of many new "green" carpet resources and products. Here are a few things to know when considering "green" carpeting:

Walk on the safer side

Most carpets are made from petroleum-based synthetic fibers, such as nylon. A typical synthetic carpet, with backing, adhesives and pads, contains dozens of chemicals and gases. These include volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other potential toxics. They can cause indoor-air-quality problems and trigger dangerous reactions in susceptible people, especially when carpets "off-gas" after installation.

To reduce off-gassing in your home, ask the retailer to unroll and air out the carpet at the warehouse for 72 hours before installing it.

Look for carpet and pads that display the Carpet and Rug Institute's "Green Label" for indoor-air quality. However, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission points out, the Green Label does not guarantee a carpet will not cause health problems.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE TIMES

Urban Neutral rugs at the Environmental Home Center are made of 100 percent wool.

Lay it down green

Resources

Washington Toxics Coalition: www.watoxics.org/content/pdf/CarpetFactSheet.pdf

Green Seal: www.greenseal.org/resources/reports/CGR_carpet.pdf

Carpet and Rug Institute: www.carpet-rug.org

Carpet America Recovery Effort: www.carpetrecovery.org

Consider these alternatives to standard synthetic carpets:

- **Natural carpets.** Wool carpets work well in many situations. They can be pricey, but you may find them for under \$20 per square yard at discount and liquidation stores. Environmental Home Center (EHC, www.environmentalhomecenter.com) in South Seattle carries one of the greenest wool brands, Nature's Carpet from Colin Campbell & Sons in Vancouver, B.C., for \$44 to \$76 per square yard. Other natural carpet fibers offered at EHC include sisal, coir and seagrass, from \$14 to \$42 per square yard.

- **Carpet tiles.** Though often synthetic, these are greener than regular carpets mainly because you can easily replace tiles in worn spots individually, rather than recarpeting an entire room.

Local outlets for FLOR, an especially eco-friendly residential carpet tile made by Interface, include Lowe's stores (www.lowe.com), Greener Lifestyles in Ballard (<http://greenerlifestyles.com>) and Design Within Reach in Belltown and Kirkland (www.dwr.com). Lowe's sells FLOR carpet tiles for \$22 to \$31 per square yard. Some homeowners also have begun to use commercial-grade carpet tiles, which can be found at similar prices.

Some homeown-

- **Recycled-fiber carpets.** EHC carries the Mohawk Aladdin carpet, made of polyester fiber recovered from plastic soda bottles, for \$13 to \$28 per square foot. Several other carpet manufacturers also offer lines with recycled content, but you may have to search diligently for them.

Keep it clean

Even when vacuumed regularly, carpets can harbor dust, allergens and tracked-in toxins such as lead and pesticides, according to the Washington Toxics Coalition. Keep your carpets cleaner by using doormats and removing shoes whenever possible.

Many Seattle-area homes boast handsome wood floors. Using throw rugs in some rooms instead of wall-to-wall carpets will show off your floors, save money and make it easier to clean your home.

Green building experts warn against installing carpet in laundry rooms, bathrooms or kitchens. When it gets wet — and it will — mold and bacteria may soon follow.

Disposing of old carpet

Carpet may make its greatest impact on the environment when it's no longer underfoot.

In 2005, more than 24 million pounds of waste carpet were buried in King County's Cedar Hills Landfill in Maple Valley.

Carpet makes up 2 percent (by volume) of all municipal solid waste, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Less than 4 percent of waste carpet was recycled in 2002, according to industry estimates.

Under pressure from governments and environmental groups, carpet-industry representatives signed the National Carpet Recycling Agreement in 2002. This pact established the Carpet America Recovery Effort and set up a 10-year schedule to increase carpet recycling and reuse.

Unfortunately, there are few options locally for recycling residential carpet. The carpet category in King County's "What Do I Do With ... ?" Web site (www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw) mostly includes disposal and reuse options. If your old carpet seems reusable, offer it on one of the free online exchanges.

One bright spot: A local recycling market does exist for old residential carpet pads (only the standard kind, made from polyurethane foam). Pacific Urethane Recycling (253-852-9080) in Kent will pay you eight cents per pound when you drop off your old foam carpet pads. A colleague said his proceeds were enough to buy a hot chocolate on the way home.

Many local carpet stores also recycle old foam pads, but usually just from their customers.

The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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