

Funky style in shades of green

Sustainable design products have shed their decent-but-dowdy image, says **Charlotte Mackness**

People assume that anything environmentally sensitive must be inferior quality, costly, look "natural" and appeal only to social-worker vegans. But that couldn't be farther from the truth," says Gary Nicholson, who has installed his GlassStone floors and work surfaces in some of Britain's funkier bars and private homes. Made from recycled glass bound with a solvent-free resin, it looks like intergalactic granite. "Most clients buy it because of its durability and aesthetic appeal. The green qualities are a bonus."

This bonus would have been irrelevant a few years ago, when conspicuous consumers trampled ethics underfoot in the rush for the latest new thing. But now, the shift in aspirations is matched by a host of products to help us save the planet in style. Stefanie Damm set up her company, Annasach, in Berwickshire in 1998. She uses waste wool yarn, recycled wool felt, and tartan and tweed offcuts to make gorgeous accessories – throws, bolsters and cushion covers.

Less glamorous, but equally desirable (if you like blurry abstract art) are the sheets Smile Plastics makes from defunct mobile telephones, old yogurt pots, plastic bottles and wellies. These can be used as table tops, work surfaces and wall coverings.

Meanwhile, Expanko manufactures funky rubber flooring from recycled tyres and industrial waste. It also sells new cork floors, which are sustainable, cosy and come in numerous shades and patterns.

"Sustainable" is another magic word. Indeed there may be times when a virgin material, such as wood or cork, is greener than something recycled. Oliver Heath, the BBC's *Changing Rooms* interior designer, is a passionate proponent of sustainable living. "The environmental message has three elements: reduce, reuse and recycle," he says. "Recycling is what we hear most about, yet it can involve using lots of energy or releasing harmful substances."

Has anyone told the Church of England, which is to encourage vicars to bless recycling bins (*The Daily Telegraph*, January 28)?

So how do we distinguish "green" from "greenish" or "not very green at all"? Martyr Williams of Friends of the Earth sympathises with confused consumers. "If you wander around a DIY store, there's no shortage of information, usually about packaging, but lists of ingredients mean nothing to most people," he says. "Green building specialists are the best option until labelling is standardised."

The Green Claims Code was launched in 1998 and this lays down what is acceptable in advertising. For example, something can't be marketed as "50 per cent better" if it was grievously harmful to begin with.

However, Chris Herring, from the Green Building Store, fears that shoppers are still being exploited: "There isn't a body that polices green products, so people shouldn't be afraid of questioning their credentials – reputable companies will happily provide evidence."

One reason why green goods lack mass-market appeal is cost, whatever Gary Nicholson says. "Environmentally friendly stuff does tend to be more expensive but it usually works out cheaper in the long term," Oliver Heath maintains.

LED lights (which are also to be blessed by the Church) are a great example. They use an eighth of the energy of halogen, and last 25 times longer than a regular bulb, which makes them cheap to run. Specialists such as



New lease of life: GlassStone kitchen, above; Annasach 'ecohottie' made from recycled knitwear, left; plastic sheet from Smile Plastics, right

Electric Light Company stock dozens of different styles and colours.

And then there's "reuse", whether that involves finding a new home for your own unwanted stuff or going to a second-hand shop or salvage yard. "Old and reclaimed materials and furniture have so much character and history," says Heath. "There's something satisfying about using a bit of imagination to give them a new lease of life."

Why is it that this third 'R', so cheap and simple, is the easiest to forget?

■ GlassStone is available from Binch: 020 7503 3400; www.eighthinch.co.uk. Smile Plastics: 01743 850267; www.smile-plastics.co.uk. Expanko flooring is available from Floor Source: 0121 635 5770. Annasach: 01361 884189; www.annasach.com. The Green Building Store: 01484 854898; www.greenbuildingstore.co.uk. Friends Of The Earth: 0808 800 1111; www.foe.co.uk. Electric Light Company: 0845 6444317; www.electricleightcompany.com.



FRIENDORFOE

■ **PVC** A crime against the environment and good taste, especially when it comes to windows. Takes a lot of energy to produce.

■ **Sofas** Flame-retardant materials can take a long time to break down and may give off toxic fumes. Many local authorities run furniture recycling schemes and will collect unwanted pieces, saving you a trip to the tip and benefiting others.

■ **Paints** Seek out products with low levels of Volatile Organic Compounds (solvents that evaporate readily at room temperature, a potential health risk). Much of EarthBorn's range (01928 734171; www.earthbornpaints.co.uk) is VOC-free.

■ **Wood** Full of character and environmentally responsible, as long as it is from a sustainable source. Look for goods which have been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (01686 413916; www.fsc-uk.org).

■ **Carpets** Avoid toxic glues, backing that may contain formaldehyde and nasty artificial fibres, which can cause irritation. Wool is sustainable, hard-wearing and feels fabulous under the feet.

