

## TOYS GO GREEN

### Eco-friendly playthings are fun for kids, reassuring for parents

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, April 20, 2008

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Athena Brocus loves her pink Rattle Ring Girly - maybe because it's soft and cuddly, maybe because it has big, floppy ears, maybe just because it's there.

The 9-month-old has no idea that the toy from Keptin-Jr. is made in Europe from organic cotton or that it has a wooden teether instead of a plastic one. But her Mom, Nadja, does, and that's why she bought it.

"When she was born, a bunch of her toys had recalls," said Mrs. Brocus, 27. "I was just getting so frustrated because I couldn't find a single toy or teether at any of the stores that wasn't made in China."

To provide more options for parents like her who are concerned about toy safety - for their young ones and the environment - the Point Place woman started an online store, Athena Bee's Organic Toys ([www.athena-bee.com](http://www.athena-bee.com)).

"Slowly but surely I'm getting a lot more people that are beginning to look for organics," she said. "It is because of all the recalls that have kind of made them turn that way."

Industry experts say that "green toys" - toys that are eco-friendly or educate kids about the environment - are an up-and-coming trend whose appeal goes well beyond last year's high profile recalls and will last much longer than Earth Day on Tuesday.

"It's more of an overall attitude of consumers that they're looking for ways to sustain the environment," said Reyne Rice, a toy trend specialist with the Toy Industry Association, the trade organization for North American toy manufacturers.

Green toys were the talk of the American International Toy Fair in New York in February.

"2008 is the first year where you're going to see green toys everywhere," said Sheliah Gilliland, spokesman for the online toy retailer, eToys.

"I think this is part of more of a societal shift and a focus," she said. "Many families are actively trying to conserve, whether it's to conserve energy, recycle, conserve fuel. ... It make sense that green toys would be more and more popular."

Leading the charge are smaller, more nimble companies, explained Sarah Wood, director of the Amazon.com Toy Store.

For example, Green Toys, a year-old company based in San Francisco, has a line of playthings made from recycled milk jugs. It features basic items like a tea set and gardening kit.

"Our philosophy has always been: create classic toys that parents buy and kids play with perennially, but just make them out of greener, safer material," said co-founder Robert von Goeben.

All stages of creating the products take place in California, reducing the need for extra transportation that contributes to greenhouse gases and putting at ease parents who don't want to buy products from China after



Athena Brocus chews on Sophie the Giraffe, a teething toy made of natural rubber and food grade paint. It is one of the toys sold by her mother, Nadja Brocus, at her online organic-toy store. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

last year's recalls.

Other companies that stress using environmentally responsible materials include Blue Orange. It makes wooden toys with the promise that it will plant two trees for every one that it cuts down to make games.

Toy Quest has Planet Care, a line of dozens of environmentally friendly toys, and plush toy maker Aurora World Inc. has an upcoming Eco-Plush animal line made from soybeans and kapok (silky fibers from a tropical tree) that is expected to hit store shelves in June.

Some products are notable because of what they do have - vegetable dyes, all-natural materials, recycled plastics. Others make their mark because of what they lack, such as batteries.

Uncle Milton makes solar-powered racers and robots, and Sprig Toys has a line of vehicles coming out in stores this fall that is totally kid-powered. When a child pushes its Discover Rig, made of a composite of recycled plastic and wood waste, it triggers a generator that powers its lights and sounds.

Justin Discoe, a co-founder of the Colorado company, said parents are more conscious than ever of what goes into their children's toys, examining them with the same care as they do food ingredients. Toy companies are responding.

"It's as wholesome as we can get," he said.

Even some of the major toy makers are getting in on the action. Mattel has a new patchwork line of handbags and other accessories made from leftover fabric called Barbie BCause.

And USAopoly's Monopoly: Planet Earth Edition (based on the series Planet Earth) will be available for Earth Day. It will be made using recycled paper, and players will buy and sell natural resources, landscapes, and animals.

Part of the catch - at least for now - is that green toys tend to be more expensive, although some manufacturers say they expect to produce goods at competitive prices.

"It generally costs more," said Ms. Rice, the toy trend specialist. "It is made from materials that are tougher to process."

For now, green toys remain a small part of the overall toy market, but that doesn't mean they must be hard to find.

"A lot of these toys are going to be featured in the mass market, which is what's exciting," Ms. Rice said. "You'll be able to see them in Target. You'll see some of them in Wal-Mart and Toys R Us, and you'll definitely see them in specialty stores in different communities."

In Maumee, the WizardKids toy store already carries some of these brands, including products from Blue Orange and Uncle Milton. Owner Deane Nelson said the real issue is how much consumer interest in these kinds of toys will overcome a higher price tag during these challenging economic times.

"You have to balance these issues out," he said.

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