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## art of everyday living

On May 6, designers and lifestyle consultants Alison Forbes Houlihan and Laura Forbes Carlin answered questions from our readers. Here is the transcript of the discussion.

If you would like to participate in online discussions at traditionalhome.com, please email us at traditionalhome@meredith.com. We'd love to hear your suggestions.

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**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Welcome everyone! This is the online chat with home and lifestyle consultants Laura Forbes Carlin and Alison Forbes Houlihan. Thank you all for joining us.

To help move things along, I've compiled all the questions we have received and I will post them in the chat, one by one, so that Alison and Laura can respond. If we have time at the end, we might be able to open it up for further questions.

Ok, let's get started! Our first question is from Sangita... Sangita would like to know how she can make her home safe and green for her children.

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Hi Everyone. Thank you for joining us! There are many ways to make your home safe and green for your children including some very simple practices such as opening windows to allow in fresh air each day—having people take their shoes off before they come into your home to avoid tracking in dirt and pesticides...

One of the best things you can do is to use natural cleaning products—conventional cleaning products are one of the leading causes of indoor air pollution and indoor air pollution is often 2-5 times higher than outside even in large cities!

You can also check out our book, "The Peaceful Nursery, Preparing a Home for Your Baby" — which has lots of healthy, green suggestions.

**Sangita G.**

I'm worried about chemicals in household cleaning products.

**Angela C.**

What basic chemicals are 'more' safe to use in the home? Bleach, vinegar?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Almost all grocery stores now carry natural cleaning products...you can also make your own! It is very easy and less expensive - in my house I mostly use combinations of vinegar, water and baking soda...

Avoid bleach. Vinegar is a natural disinfectant. You can also use hydrogen peroxide. To whiten whites I fill a bowl with water, add Borax (see box for amounts) and place it in the sun.

**Sangita G.**

That's a wonderful thing coz I never thought of making my own and using it.

**Angela C.**

Does the vinegar and baking soda kill the germs as well? Esp. in the bathroom?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Yes! Well, the vinegar does. Vinegar is a natural antiseptic—as is lavender essential oil—you can fill a spray bottle with water —add 8 drops lavender essential oil and spray on your bathroom counters etc. Athena Thompson in her book, "Homes that..."



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real, says it is as effective as pnenoi.

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Chemicals will bind to house dust so investing in a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter will help too...

Also— to keep the environment healthy and green for your children— try to avoid plastics...

**Helga S.**

I like the HEPA filter angle

**Sangita G.**

There is a lot of hype about certain companies being green. Is it true or they are just making advantage of people's awareness

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

You're right to be wary of labels, but some great companies are Seventh Generation, Method, Caldrea, Ecover...

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Also, here are some "recipes" for making your own cleaning products... Windows: Mix 1/4 cup vinegar with 2 cups water in a spray bottle. Shake before use. Wood surfaces and floors: Mix 1/4 cup vinegar to a gallon of water with a few drops of lemon essential oil.

**Amanda S.**

I use a paste of baking soda and water to scour my tub, sink, tile floor and toilet...works great! I use vinegar for wiping surfaces in the kitchen and bath. Just water for the dining room table and add a table cloth on occasion.

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

One more homemade recipe for cleaning... Scouring powder: Sprinkle baking soda on surface and scrub with a damp sponge.

**Angela C.**

Laura— Can you explain further why to avoid plastics and offer some alternatives?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Whenever you bring something new into your home make sure it is non toxic. There are so many great options now— for example with toys opt for wood with non toxic finishes...

regarding plastics— some plastics contain chemicals that off-gas, compromising your air quality... especially if you have very young children who put toys in their mouth and chew on toys— some plastics do leach chemicals...

if there is a non-plastic option go for it—such as stainless steel water bottles...

if you want to use plastic— choose the safer plastic polypropylene (recycle number 5 ). in general the safer plastics are recycle numbers 1,2,4 and 5- Avoid #3,6,7.

**Sangita G.**

But what do we use in microwave if not plastic?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Best to stick with microwave safe glass and ceramic as plastic when heated in a microwave could potentially leach chemicals into your food...

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**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Next question is from Helga -- Helga would like to know about solar energy and how affordable it is for the average homeowner today. Is wind power a realistic option for the average homeowner? If so, what are the hurdles the average homeowner might face with regards to receiving permission from local zoning boards?

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Solar energy isn't our area of expertise, but if you're interested in solar we know an often missed first step is to get an energy audit. First thing you want to do is cut down on the amount of energy you use... It is also said that with tax incentives solar electricity can pay for itself in five to ten years. However, the initial cost is expensive... it's an investment... for more information visit [www.bp.com](http://www.bp.com)

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Next up is a question from Angela... Angela is looking to build a home in the next year and her goal is to make it a more 'green' home. She would like some information about web sites, organizations, companies that have brochures, products and methodology on building a better 'green' sustainable home.

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

A great book for creating a healthy home is "Homes that Heal" by Athena Thompson and a web site to check out is [greenbuilding.com](http://greenbuilding.com)

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Traditional Home has a great column called Green Space. We also like [thegreenguide.com](http://thegreenguide.com), [www.greenbuildingsupply.com](http://www.greenbuildingsupply.com) and [treehugger.com](http://treehugger.com) and [www.naturalhomemagazine.com](http://www.naturalhomemagazine.com)

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Next question is from Amanda S.... Amanda has seen that bamboo is being marketed as a sustainable material and used for many purposes (flooring, fabric, window shades, natural-living fences and so much more). She would like to know if there are other sustainable materials that have such versatility.

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Hemp seems to be another-- I just bought Hemp milk at the grocery store!

I have been very happy with my hemp shower (to replace the off-gassing vinyl) as well as the hemp curtains in my son's room...

**Amanda S.**

and how was hemp milk?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

The hemp slip covers on my sofa have been washing very well

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

For floors, cork is another sustainable choice and of course you can get FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified wood...

**Amanda S.**

When you say "Hemp shower" are you referring to the shower itself or the curtain? Is hemp mainly used for fabric based items?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

I also had a hemp rug at one point which I found a little rough, but good for an entryway— I haven't tried the milk yet!

Sorry— I meant shower curtain!

**Angela C.**

Are there any specific chains of building stores that have a section on sustainable materials and reusable materials?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

I heard Home Depot is now a major carrier of FSC certified wood

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

We love Livingreen. It's store in Culver City, California, but they are online and you can call with questions... [livingreen.com](http://livingreen.com)

**Amanda S.**

My husband has a remodeling company and after hearing me push low energy and being green for the past few years he's trying to adopt greener building standards...this is part of my interest in sustainable building materials other than bamboo

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

It's great that you're pushing your husband to move toward green building materials... try [www.greenbuildingsupply.com](http://www.greenbuildingsupply.com)

**Angela C.**

I saw on an episode of Extreme Makeover Home Edition, where they took old tires and made a flooring surface for the horses. Where can you buy/explore these type materials?

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

When you explore recycled materials to use in your home make sure you're recycling a material that's good for your health... it's great to find new uses for tires, but it's not a healthy material... I also watched a home makeover show where they re-used old building supplies... pvc pipes to create a lamp, but when pvc heats up (which it would do with a light bulb inside) it emits toxic fumes... we always try to think about health, as well as green...

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Pam W. asks, Why does so much "green" design have so little color? It's all so...neutral.

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Green really doesn't have to be neutral. I happen to love whites and creams, but it certainly doesn't have to be that way... it's just my personal taste... There are lots of colorful green options... for example healthy, green paints come in every color...

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

And as more people request green alternatives, more and more green options are emerging... for colorful green fabrics check out qcollection.com and modgreenpod.com

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Next is from Stephanie S... Stephanie has have worked hard to create a mostly organic nursery for her baby, but would love to decorate a little more and wallpaper the walls. She knows a lot of wallpaper can be quite toxic. Can you recommend the least toxic way to go about this? She wants her aesthetics to live up to her ideals!

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Stephanie, as you suggested wallpaper is made of vinyl which releases unhealthy chemicals and often even worse are the adhesives and glues used to put them up. In addition, if you live in a humid climate, mold can get trapped under the wallpaper. so as you can tell I'm not a huge fan of wall paper... having said that there are some companies that are making organic cotton wallpaper or vinyl-free and there are some healthier adhesives... check out: Eco-fix adhesive, Wallpaper: modgreenpod.com another idea to add interest to the nursery walls would be stencils or murals... obviously using no, low-voc paint.

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Next question is from Jane P... What do you consider to be the one most important thing to do to create a green and healthy home environment?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

I think one of the most important things you can do is to be a conscious consumer- first by buying less. Probably reducing is most important-

If you do choose to buy something from food to water, clothes home furnishings— support a green company or product...

I think it is ultimately very individual, but for example I have been trying to work on not wasting food... it seems we always end up cleaning out the refrigerator each week and throwing things away... when I think of all the energy that goes into making transporting etc. food..

But also, asking ourselves each time we want something do we really need it—is there something else that could fulfill that function? and if we do want it...

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**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Cheryl G. and her family will be moving soon and she will start painting. She would like to know if there is a type of paint or brand of paint that does not smell.

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Paints can give off a toxic fume (VOCs), which is the strong, chemical odor you're smelling... These chemicals can remain in the air even after the paint is dry... so look for low or No VOC paints which are a healthier alternative and don't smell as much for as long... You can also use natural paints, such as milk paint, natural lime paint or clay, which won't have as strong an odor... check out the following companies...

- Opera Paints, [operapaints.com](http://operapaints.com)
- Bioshield, [bioshieldpaint.com](http://bioshieldpaint.com)
- Lime Paint by Living Green [livinggreen.com](http://livinggreen.com)
- AFM Safe Coat, [afmsafecoat.com](http://afmsafecoat.com)
- Old Fashioned Milk Paint Company, [milkpaint.com](http://milkpaint.com)
- American Clay: [americanclay.com](http://americanclay.com)

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Next up is a question from Pam S... Her question is about plastic baby bottles. Which brand is safest and is glass the best way to go? Also, she has a microwave steam sterilizer and uses the Medela microwave sterilizer bags. Are these safe to steam bottles, nipples shields and pump accessories?

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Glass is a great option — we like Evenflo ([evenflo.com](http://evenflo.com)) or weego bottles are glass but come with a plastic sleeve so if the bottle falls it is less likely to break - but if you prefer plastic we like Born Free Bottles which are free from BPA - [www.newbornfree.com](http://www.newbornfree.com) or Medela products are also BPA-free as well...

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Here's a good one from Margaret H... Her mother was the "queen of clutter" and she doesn't want to be the princess. What can she do?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Here is something that helps me get rid of it...clutter is really taking up space and blocking all the things we really want from coming into our lives— it is delaying the realization of our dreams...

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

First, I would think about why you're accumulating clutter... there are different types of clutter... are you holding on to it because you think you may use it one day? how realistic that?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Before you buy something new ask yourself— do I really have time for this- time to clean, store, organize, dry-clean, tailor, learn how to use?— our possessions really do end up taking so much time and energy that we can't focus on what really matters in life...

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Also getting rid of clutter doesn't have to be a big production... you can start small with one drawer... for more tips on getting rid clutter you can visit our website [artofeverydayliving.com](http://artofeverydayliving.com)

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Sean C. asks, Is it OK to use air-filters in nurseries? We live in a place with poor air quality...Thanks.

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

The only concern with air filters in a nursery is the electromagnetic fields (EMF'S) emitted from the filter. The research on EMF's is inconclusive, but some research indicates that exposure creates a higher risk for certain types of cancer. EMF's are significantly reduced by keeping any electronic device including the air filter at least four feet away from where your child sleeps. You can also try running the filter for an hour before bedtime or nap time (keeping the door closed) and then unplugging it before sleep. A company called H3environmental ([www.H3environmental.com](http://www.H3environmental.com)) carries air filters with a shielded cable to reduce (or maybe even eliminate?) EMF's.

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Also, if you know you live in an area with poor air quality, make sure your air filter has both a HEPA and carbon filter. The HEPA will only capture dust particles— it is the carbon that captures the VOC's.

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Ashley L. has a question about rugs... She is looking for a carpet or area rug for a playroom for her 8 month old. She wants it to be free of toxins and durable for spills and lots of foot traffic yet not industrial. Do you have any recommendations in different price ranges (splurge vs. steal)?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Finding a healthy carpet is challenging! Most wool carpets are sprayed with moth repellants and synthetic carpets contain VOC's that can off gas unhealthy fumes...

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

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Some good resources for carpets are: Earthweave.com Naturescarpet.com Concepts international at Living Green (310) 838.8442 We have also heard a lot about Flor tiles - www.flor.com (but call the company and ask if they are voc-free)

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

Wall to wall carpets also house dust, mold, bacteria—the best thing is to opt for area rugs...

Look for area rugs made from untreated wool- with no adhesives or cotton area rugs

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Next up is a question from Andrea G. -- Which plastic cups and plates are safe for us to keep, which ones should we throw out and what should replace them?

**Laura Forbes Carlin**

As general rule, replace any plastic that is worn or scratched as they are more likely to leach chemicals. Avoid plastic # 3,6 and 7 and opt for safer plastics #5. If you can avoid it altogether— kidsstuff.com has stainless steal cutlery and cups for kids. kleankanteen.com has stainless steel water bottles that also are available with sippy cup spouts

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Susan J is wondering what is the best way to dispose of water that was used to scrub down lead paint woodwork (it is powdery and peeling)

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

Susan, anytime I have a question about recycling or disposing of anything I go to earth911.org for more information.... it's a great resource!

Keep in mind, lead paint should be removed by a professional. Pregnant women in particular SHOULD NOT be exposed to any of the dust or chips created by removing lead paint.

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Linda S. has adopted fluorescent light bulbs throughout her house, and now uses canvas bags when shopping for groceries. She's stopped buying disposable plastic bottles of water — and feels these were all pretty easy things to do (although her teenage girls do miss the water bottles). She wonders if you have some other ideas she could look at for going green around her house.

**Alison Forbes Houlihan**

I think you're on the right track by taking small steps in your home... we're big believers that change begins at home...

Being green is as much about changing your habits as it is about switching to new products. So here's one idea... as you've probably heard many of our appliances are still using energy even when not in use... so unplug your appliances (and chargers too). For areas where you have lots of plugs use power strips. Plug in all your entertainment center or office equipment into one power strip and then you only have to hit one switch to turn it all off... Or even better you can invest in the Smart Strip, which apparently "senses" when you're not using an appliance and cuts the power.

For more daily tips check out idealbite.com or climatecrisis.net...

**Liz Milligan, facilitator**

Thank you all for joining us!! Laura and Alison - GREAT tips!!!!

Have a good afternoon!!!

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