

GOOD SCENTS

Lucy Siegle seeks out safe, eco-friendly candles

Pollution and toxic clouds are not ordinarily connected to the act of worship. So when Dutch researchers discovered in churches levels of potentially carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) that exceeded those found next to main roads, they were temporarily stumped. Then someone's eye alighted on the church candles burning brightly beside the altar.

In days gone by, church candles were largely made from beeswax - and, even further back, from that found in local hives, resulting in a gloriously virtuous loop whereby the same bees produced your candles and honey, and pollinated local fruit trees. In recent decades, however, paraffin candles have become ubiquitous. A by-product of petrol production, paraffin is cheap to produce but environmentally costly. As the Dutch study found, burning paraffin candles produces high amounts of particulate pollution - a major ingredient in air pollution, and linked to respiratory and heart problems, especially in children.

Given that every house appears to contain several scented candles these days, this is not just a headache for vicars. To exacerbate matters, conventional candles often contain wicks with a metal (normally zinc or lead) core to control the candle's burning rate, as well as some artificial scents and boosters. All of which conspire to create a cloud of pollution as opposed to an air of purity.

In order to avoid this toxic brew, keep things simple. Opting for old-fashioned beeswax is a good call, providing the makers have followed simple processing techniques; at www.toast.co.uk you'll

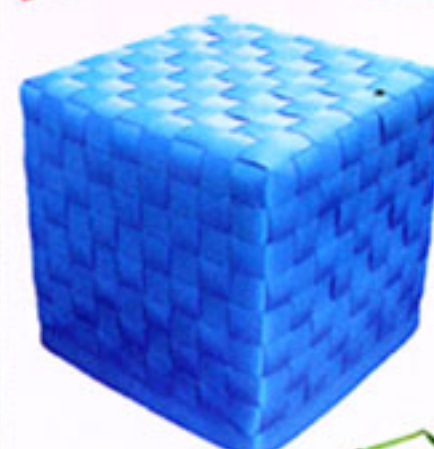


To keep things simple, opt for old-fashioned beeswax candles

find beeswax candles that are made traditionally in northern England. I mention this because much imported beeswax is now bleached and subject to a process of micro-filtration.

When it comes to the Greenest scented candles, however, beeswax - which already has its own distinctive smell - doesn't really work, which explains why some makers opt for palm-oil-based candles instead. But go carefully here. Although palm oil burns more cleanly than paraffin, the global demand is linked to the destruction of the rainforest and the substantial loss of the habitat of orang-utans, among other creatures. Make sure you choose candles made from sustainable palm oil, such as those from www.ashleigh-burwood.co.uk.

Little Satsuma (www.littlesatsuma.com), the company that makes the Orangutan Foundation's range of palm-oil-free candles, uses soy wax, also preferred by candle-maker Timothy Han (www.timothyhan.com), whose eponymous candles have become a regular feature in gift bags given out at the Oscars. Again, he uses soy wax - free from genetically modified ingredients, herbicides and pesticides - because beeswax contains too many variables for a subtly scented candle. 'Each batch of wax can have a different scent, depending on the flowers and the time of year,' he explains. As an added bonus, a good soy-wax candle will burn up to 50 per cent longer than its cheap paraffin counterpart. So while candles made from sustainable wax may be more expensive, they do tend to shine a light on the false economy of cheap candles.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Eco design is all about vision. There aren't too many design brains that would see endless possibilities in end-of-the-line seat-belt webbing, the last bit of the automotive chain inevitably dispatched to landfill. But Royal College of Art graduate Inghua Ting sees nothing but opportunity: seat belts are deftly woven into hammocks - aka 'Ting Slings' - (£450), cushions (from £40) and cubes (£150), for her Ting home range. Eco design also needs to be about confidence: the confidence to 'upcycle' - in contrast to most recycling that involves downgrading a material - something that is evident in Ting's pieces. All these products are unabashedly colourful and luxurious. Who'd have thought a seat belt could wind up this stylish? Visit www.tinglondon.com □

ILLUSTRATION: EVA WOLPERT

