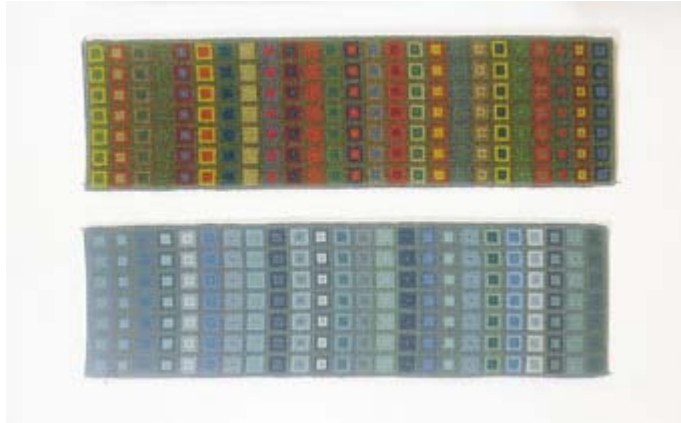


# Carpets: Think Small

by P.W. McRandle



Hyped as a comfort, wall-to-wall carpets, also known as carpeting systems, can actually be a curse. Enormous and ungainly, they trap years of tracked-in dirt, soot, animal dander, flea eggs, molds and fungi, dust mite droppings and the volatile organic chemicals (VOCs) that evaporate from conventional pesticides, cleaning products, paints and finishes and glues—including those in the carpet itself. This potent mix of allergens, irritants and toxins can trigger everything from watery eyes and sore throats to asthma attacks, dizziness and fainting spells. In a new carpeting system, VOCs in the adhesives and the polyurethane padding may offgas for weeks, releasing such nervous system toxins as formaldehyde, toluene and xylene.

The environment also suffers. The two best-selling carpet fibers—nylon and olefin—are both synthetics derived from petroleum, a non-renewable resource. The EPA estimates that in 2000 over 2.2 million tons of carpeting were dumped.

Alas, environmental certification for carpets is not straightforward. The Carpet & Rug Institute's "green tag" program has been criticized for having set arbitrary maximums for total VOCs rather than basing them on risk-assessment data. However, Nadav Malin, editor of *Environmental Building News*, notes that "pretty much every carpet on the market now has the CRI green label, and the program has been effective at eliminating the worst performers in terms of indoor air quality." Apart from VOC levels, "allergy sufferers may still be bothered by mold and pollen, which are impossible to clean out of carpeting," warns John Bower, author of *Healthy House Building for the New Millennium* (Healthy House Institute, 1999, \$21.95). "You can use natural fiber area rugs, which can be cleaned," Bower says.

Look for small, washable rugs made of untreated natural fibers that are stitched, not glued, to backing or use low- to no-VOC glues. And seek out those certified by Rugmark, an organization dedicated to ending child labor in India's rug industry. Nina Smith, executive director of Rugmark, says, "We work with NGOs who monitor our monitoring, and every Rugmark label has a number that can be tracked back to the loom it's from." For a nationwide list of retailers, see [www.rugmark.org](http://www.rugmark.org).

## Rugs and Small Carpets

Natural Home ([www.naturalhomeproducts.com](http://www.naturalhomeproducts.com); 707-824-0914): Area rugs (small rugs start at \$75), carpet pieces (from \$35.45 per sq. yard plus binding)

EarthWeave Carpet Mills ([www.earthweave.com](http://www.earthweave.com); 706-278-8200): Wool, hemp, cotton carpet with jute backing; \$32 to \$43/yard

Yayla Tribal Rugs ([www.yayla.com](http://www.yayla.com); 617-576-3249): Wool rugs, natural dyes, traditional designs, hand washable ; \$5-\$35/sq. ft.

## **Carpet Pad**

Bonded Logic ([www.bondedlogic.com](http://www.bondedlogic.com); 480-812-9114) 90% recycled, post-industrial, cotton fiber carpet pad; \$1.30 to \$1.50/sq. yard