Extreme Green Makeover: The Hair Care Edition

Can a cornucopia of organic products help you cultivate healthier tresses?

February 27, 2009 By Kellee Terrell

Everything seems to be going green or organic lately: cleaning products, light bulbs, toilet paper—even ketchup. The hair and beauty industry was among the first to take part in the greening of America. But even though you can find a wide range of organic, natural and vegan hair products for every budget in many drugstore aisles and salons across the country, they haven't quite made it into the mainstream. A 2008 study conducted by the TABS Group, a Connecticut-based market research firm, found that only 4 percent of American consumers purchased organic hair products last year. But that doesn't mean consumers aren't interested. "There has always been a consumer segment interested in more eco-friendly products," says Anne Talley, senior vice president of marketing for L'Oréal Paris. "Yet consumers tend to stick to eco-friendly habits that don't require a sacrifice."

Sacrifice or not, can eco-friendly hair product ingredients really make a positive impact on our hair as well as the environment, or is it all just Mother Nature-knows-best hype? *Real Health* has untangled the myths and misinformation to offer definitive answers to the most common questions about green hair products.

Are these products really better?
To date, no scientific data prove organic products work better. But some ingredients in conventional hair products, such as sulfates, are more harmful to hair health. "Sulfates are excellent cleansers, maybe too good [a cleanser] for color-treated hair," Talley says. "Sulfates can deplete hair of moisture and strip color from the core."

What makes something organic, vegan or natural?
For something to qualify as organic, it must have the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) stamp of approval and at least 70 percent of the ingredients must be organic. Vegan products are plant-based and cannot be made with any animal by-products or tested on animals. But government regulations allowing manufacturers to label a product "natural" are less strict—any product with as little as one natural ingredient can be marketed as natural.

What ingredients are suspect?

It’s all in the labels. Chemicals and preservatives such as phthalates, parabens, petrochemicals and glycols; synthetic fragrance and color; sodium lauryl/laureth sulfate; DEA and TEA; toluene; and formaldehyde could irritate the skin or raise other health safety concerns.

While many hair products designed for women of African descent contain some of these ingredients, more manufacturers are creating products with the earth-conscious black woman in mind, such as The Jane Carter Solution, HairVeda and Bee Mine. And contrary to popular belief, using products not specifically made for black women won’t necessarily make your hair fall out. Aubrey Organics, Dr. Bronner’s and Giovanni Organics are just three brands not targeted to African Americans but suitable for coarse and relaxed hair.

Be prepared to go on a mission, though. As in life, finding the right products is a matter of trial and error.

Eastern Promises
The 411 on India’s popular hair tradition

More and more black women are jumping on the ayurvedic bandwagon. The 5,000-year-old holistic practice of ayurveda, which means “science of life,” promotes inner and outer health by using herbs, organic powders and oils and adhering to a nutritionally sound diet.

As an introduction, here’s one easy ayurvedic hair treatment anyone can use:
Scalp oiling: Many Indian women oil their scalp before cleansing. Some commonly used oils include amla (prevents premature graying and shedding), brahmi (promotes hair growth) and coconut (thickens hair) oils. This process can help control dandruff, excessive shedding and other hair loss issues. Directions: Massage a small amount of oil throughout your hair and scalp; comb gently, and then wrap with a towel or place a plastic conditioning cap on your head for a few hours or overnight. When you’re ready, rinse, shampoo and condition as usual. FYI: Many local Indian grocers carry these products; you can also order them online. What’s better is that often these oils cost less than $7.

You should do plenty of research before starting an ayurvedic regimen. Learn more at reenita.com.

Kitchen Clinic
With the recession in full effect, who can afford luxury treatments? Try these cupboard remedies:

Eggs: Naturally rich in essential proteins, eggs are great for strengthening the hair. Pour one cup of water, a tablespoon of coconut or olive oil and one raw egg into a bowl and stir. Apply to dry hair from root to tip. Leave on for 15 minutes and rinse. Immediately shampoo and apply a non-protein moisturizing deep conditioner.

Honey: This humectant is a natural moisturizer and can rescue parched hair. Stir a tablespoon into your deep conditioning mix for an extra moisture boost. Don’t let its stickiness fool you—honey rinses out easily.

Organic Apple Cider Vinegar (ACV): ACV can remove hair product buildup. After shampooing, add one capful of organic and unfiltered ACV to one quart of warm water. Pour over your hair, let it sit for five minutes and rinse out. Follow with a moisturizing conditioner.

Extra Virgin Olive Oil (EVOO): Use EVOO—rich in vitamin E and healthy fats—as a pre-shampoo treatment. Apply to hair and scalp, rinse after 15 minutes. Or add some to your deep conditioner.

HAIR JOURNEYS
Kellee Terrell

Last May, I had given up on my hair—thinning edges, split ends and strands dryer than the Sahara. Newsflash! My hair wasn't indestructible. To take control, I came up with a plan. Since I already incorporated organic foods into my diet, why not use the same approach for my hair?

Thanks to websites such as Long Hair Care Forums, Mane and Chic, and Anti-Hair Slave, I learned how to safely and effectively use natural products, everyday foods and ayurvedic medicines. I started small, by keeping some non-organic products, but added new basics, such as an ayurvedic shampoo bar, and numerous oils and moisturizers, such as shea butter and Shescentit Seyani Hair Butter.

To fix my hair problems, however, I learned that it would take more than just new products. I also needed to change the way I was treating my hair. I started wrapping my hair with a satin scarf before going to sleep to avoid breakage; I reduced the amount of heat I used for styling; and I used a deep conditioning treatment weekly.

And it's paid off. My hair has never been this healthy.

My tips:

- It's OK if everything's not organic: Sometimes your hair loves a conventional product. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Add what you think would be beneficial, and keep what you swear works.
- Keep it simple: Don't rush to follow every hair care trend. Start with scalp massages twice a week, cleansing and deep conditioning every week and moisturizing and sealing your ends each day. Once you've mastered that, add something new.
- Let 'em crack jokes: Some people are set in their ways and might laugh at your new approach. No worries—that will end when they see that your new hair is growing and looks healthy.

STUFF WE LOVE
These products are worth every cent.

Cleanse:
Burt's Bees Avocado Butter Pre-Shampoo ($9.00, 4.34 oz.) This moisturizing pre-shampoo treatment is packed with avocado, nettles and rosemary to soften tresses. burtsbees.com

Burt's Bees Rosemary Mint Shampoo Bar ($6.00, 3.5 oz.) Who needs coffee? Wake your senses and scalp with the scent of peppermint and a pinch of yucca. burtsbees.com

Design Essentials Organic Cleanse ($7.50, 8 fl. oz.) This deep cleaning and moisturizing shampoo is loaded with botanicals and henna. designessentials.com

Condition:
Organix Nourishing Coconut Milk Conditioner ($6.99, 13 fl. oz.) A blend of coconut milk, whipped egg white proteins and oils transforms the hair. organixhair.com

L'Oréal EverPure Moisture Deep Restorative Masque ($8.99, 5.1 fl. oz.) Repair damaged tresses with this rich mint and rosemary vegan cream. lorealparisusa.com

Style:
Alterna Hemp With Organics Texturizing Glaze ($14.99, 5 fl. Ox.) Got curls/ Keep them defined, separated and frizz-free with this lightweight styling salve. alternahaircare.com
Alterna Hemp With Organics Straightening Balm ($15.99, 5.1 fl. Oz.) Add a dollop of this humidty-resistant lotion to your hari to guarantee a super sleek blowout. alternahaircare.com

Smooth:
Shescentit Seyani Hair Butter in Vanilla Almond ($9.00, 4 oz.) Made from unrefined shea butter and nine oils, this whipped cream melts into your ends. Available in 12 different scents—we adore the Chocolate Truffle and Sugar Cookie. shescentit.com

Tropic Isle Jamaica Black Castor Oil ($7.99, 4 oz.) This super thick unrefined oil is reputed to stimulate hair growth and seal in moisture. There's no research to substantiate the claims, but we love it. sams247.com

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