

TIME

Style & Design

NOTEBOOK BEAUTY

A Closer Look At Labels

By using cosmetic products that are marked organic or natural, consumers are taking precautions. But does organic really make a difference when it comes to beauty?

By Alice Park

O.K., SO PERHAPS A PASSION to save the earth and leave the teeniest possible carbon footprint isn't at the top of a beauty junkie's priority list. When it comes to cosmetics, it's all about trends, not trees. And let's face it, if you've finally discovered the creamiest cleanser or the perfect shade of lip gloss, does it really matter that it isn't made with renewable, eco-friendly ingredients?

Well, as it turns out, it does—to more and more consumers. With eco-chic firmly established on the runway—thanks to organic fashions from the likes of Stella McCartney and earth ambassador Bono—organic products are continuing their march out of the kitchen and straight into the beauty drawer. Globally, sales of natural and organic cosmetics reached an estimated \$7 billion last year, according to Organic Monitor, a British company that tracks the growth of the organic market. And those sales, which have included familiar botanical brands such as Burt's Bees, the Body Shop, Nature's Gate and Origins, have been growing 20% annually and are expected to double in market share in the coming years. Some of that growth will be driven by brands already known for their reliance on botanicals and natural ingredients that are now turning to organics. Aveda's founder is developing a new line of head-to-toe organic products under the Intelligent Nutrients label, while Kiehl's will soon market its first product with a certified (by EcoCert, the European seal of eco-friendliness) organic ingredient, argan oil, sourced from Morocco and coveted for its rich moisturizing effects.

Additional growth will come from newcomers, brands that traditionally haven't been

known to tout the importance of natural ingredients in their products. McCartney paired up with Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) Beauté last year to launch an organic skin-care line, Care, while France-based L'Oréal (which now owns YSL Beauté) recently acquired Sanoflore, a producer of several dozen organic face and body products. Estée Lauder, which owns Origins, hit beauty counters with Origins Organics last year. "We certainly were seeing the organic movement in the food industry, and we wanted to bring that kind of choice to the [beauty] consumer," says Lynn Mazzella, vice president of global product development for Origins.

Navigating among those choices, however, is another matter. Driving the trend for eco-conscious beauty is the same consumer obsession with natural—and increasingly, environmentally responsible—ingredients behind the organic-food movement. But there are currently no mandated government standards defining organic when it comes to cosmetics. The Food and Drug Administration regulates the safety of beauty products, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) oversees the labeling of anything claiming to be organic, be it a berry or a body lotion. "If any product meets the USDA organic standards for production, handling and labeling, then it is eligible for USDA organic certification," says Joan Shaeffer, spokeswoman for the agency. "We don't care if you eat it or shampoo your hair with it." And adhering to the USDA's criteria, called the National Organic Program (NOP), is strictly voluntary. Even more important, note skin experts, the NOP is a marketing program, not a safety rating, so earning the USDA's organic seal

does not necessarily mean a potion won't cause an allergic reaction or a flare-up of dermatitis.

So what does it mean when the organic lemon in your kitchen is cultivated under the same conditions as the ingredients in the organic soap in your shower? For starters, it's the best assurance you can get that your organic beauty products—and the packaging they come in—are formulated from food-grade organic raw materials. The NOP logo certifies that the ingre-

'If any product meets the USDA organic standards for production, handling and labeling, then it is eligible for USDA organic certification. We don't care if you eat it or shampoo your hair with it.'

—JOAN SHAEFFER, USDA SPOKESWOMAN

dients, whether tea-tree oil or rosemary, were grown on organic farms that are pesticide-free, from plants that were not genetically modified and on plots of land that, for at least three years, have not nurtured nonorganic crops grown with synthetic pesticides and other agricultural agents. Growers must also be vigilant about airborne contaminants—ensuring that wind doesn't blow any nonorganic seeds onto the organic farm. Organic plants must also be protected from potential exposure to sewer sludge, a possible source of contamination from synthetic goods.

Once in the factory, organic products must be processed on dedicated machinery and cleaned with environmentally safe products. "It took us three years to convert manufacturing for our organic products," says Mazzella, of Origins' USDA-certified line, "and two years to come up with new formulas for them."

Even the USDA label, however, requires that only 95% of the ingredients in an organic product be organically grown. And the remaining 5%? Those agents may be nonorganic, but they must still come from materials on the NOP list, which include mostly natural components such as vitamin E as a stabilizer and citric acid to balance pH, neither of which can be found or produced in a completely organic form yet.

Products with less than 95% of organic ingredients can still claim to be organic, at least in part—but they are no longer eligible for USDA certification. If products contain from 70% to 94.9% of organic elements, for example, their labels can claim that they are made with organic materials. Any beauty concoction with less than 70% organic content can only indicate, generally in the ingredients list, the specific agents that are certified organic. Neither product can use the USDA-certified organic logo.

So is all this label-scouring worth the trouble? That depends. If you're organic-obsessed and demand that your shampoo be as environmentally conscious as your chicken, then looking for the NOP logo will certainly put your mind at ease. But if you are choosing organic products because you believe that natural products are better for your skin and body, you may want to consider this: "Any benefits are sure to be incremental at best," says Dr. Alexa Kimball, a dermatologist at Harvard Medical School. "Typically, there is some research somewhere that boosts up a claim about the benefits of organic agents, but whether it was done in a study that doctors would consider valid is a whole different scenario." Plus, she and other experts note, nonorganic cosmetics are relatively safe. Just because something is made in a lab does not mean it's bad for your body. In fact, many natural and organic ingredients come in oil form, and there are people who cannot tolerate these oils regardless of how "pure" they are. "Take aloe, which may be organic and come right from the plant but is a sensitizer," says Dr. Deborah Sarnoff, of New York University. "There is a percentage of the population who are allergic to it when they put it on their skin."

Another key feature of organic products is their shorter shelf life. Because they are made with natural ingredients and essential oils as preservatives, organic cosmetics generally have half the shelf life of nonorganic formulas. In the end, say the cosmetics manufacturers, the choice is the consumer's. "If the consumer wants organic products, we will give them organic products," says Sylvie Raynal, director of research and development at Sothy's, a French beauty company that is readying an organic line set to include a cream, cleanser and toner, all certified by EcoCert. "But they must be organics that are certified and are well tolerated by the consumer." Without that, no amount of marketing would make any difference. ■

or
kt
n
ook
ing
ers
rld