

# Step lightly in 'green' shoes

**Eco-friendly can be stylish, too**

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STEP ASIDE, Birkenstock. Now there's something fabulous.

Environmentally conscious brands such as Simple, Terra Plana and Charmone are churning out trendy tennies, sexy sandals and gorgeous, Carrie Bradshaw-worthy heels in the \$50 to \$300 range.

It's about time. The eco-fashion craze has delivered baby-soft bamboo washcloths and runway-quality organic cotton dresses. Footwear, it seems, is the last frontier. Now, you don't have to sacrifice your aesthetics for your ethics, says Zem Joaquin, founder of the San Francisco-based Ecofabulous.com, a site devoted to great design that's good for the planet.

"In terms of the way they look, there isn't even a drastic difference between the shoes I would traditionally purchase and the shoes of this modern eco-movement," says Joaquin, who wears heels from Charmone's Spice Collection.

The difference is how they're made. Thanks to Birkenstock, designers know that cork, from the cork tree, makes a soft foot bed; and jute, a natural fiber from a shrub, produces fine upper material.

But new shoes from Simple utilize crepe, a natural rubber tapped from the hevea tree, for their squishy outsoles, in addition to bamboo and nontoxic, water-based glues.

All of the Santa Barbara company's shoes have some level of sustainability. But the Green Toes line is almost all cradle-to-cradle, meaning that the Earth's resources are used and then returned to the Earth, as opposed to synthetics packing landfills. You'll find car tires in canvas sandals, and wool-based felt in loafers. Come July, you'll see laces made out of recycled plastic bottles.

"It's like developing technology, so when we figure out these new innovations we go back and try to implement them into our older products," says Greg Nielsen, a spokesman for Simple.

Natural materials such as bamboo, which is anti-microbial and a perfect insole, and hemp have long been abundantly available.

Blackspot Shoes uses the latter in its classic sneaker, a dead ringer for Converse All-Stars; and the Unswisher, a boot. The shoes are made from a biodegradable, vegetarian leather in a safe, unionized factory. Even the logo is hand-drawn.

"We're in a new wave of business that has to do with being local, ecological, ethical and, most of all, a new kind of cool," says Kalle Lasn, founder of the Vancouver-based company. "It's not a mega-corporate, top-down, bogus, inauthentic cool. More and more people want a bottom-up kind of cool."

But even the most corporate of shoe companies has taken steps toward sustainability.

The Nike Considered Collection features hip sneakers made from organic cotton and reductions in toxic agents found in rubbers, plastics and adhesives.

Nike's waste elimination program, Reuse-A-Shoe, uses rubber from old outsoles in golf products and running tracks; foam from midsoles goes into playground surfacing; and upper fabric is used for padding under basketball courts.

A Nike representative could not be reached for comment. But Joaquin swears by the shoes.

"I like the Nike Considereds more, aesthetically, than the Simples," she says. "Even my hippest male friends wear them."

Even more hip, perhaps, are fashion-forward women, who can spot Christian Louboutin knock-offs from across a cocktail party. There's something eco-friendly and cruelty-free for them, too.

New York-based Terra Plana makes bright, flirty and feminine shoes from recycled materials -- quilts, coffee bags, parachutes, car seats -- sourced near their factories. The shoes are sturdy yet light, consuming less energy and making them easier to ship.

Instead of chrome tanning, which can be carcinogenic, the leather is dyed with vegetable extracts, which often produce richer, deeper colors, Joaquin says, and also spare the lives of leather tanners in China and Italy.

"Tanning is so toxic that the average life expectancy of those who do it is 35," she says.

San Diego-based Charmone not only strays from tanning, but from animal skins in general.

The European-designed, eco-couture shoes are made from Italian microfibers. The synthetic microfiber process is actually less polluting to the environment than tanning, factory farming and processing leather, says founder Jodi Koskella.

In addition, the shoes are made with water-based glues, nickel-free hardware and are free from harmful polyvinyl chlorides, those lovely plastics that can produce dioxin as a byproduct. Exposure to dioxin has been linked to reproductive disorders and a variety of cancers.

Instead of PVC, Charmone shoes are made using a light polyurethane coating.

Koskella, a former Silicon Valley-ite, says the company started two years ago when a stylish vegan friend complained that all nonleather shoes were either ugly or poor in quality.

"This was an issue that the fashion world was not facing as people were becoming more socially aware," she says. "There was a misconception that if you care about animals and the environment, you're a hippie."

Clearly, Koskella says, that's not the case anymore.

"You can be a fashionista and be green," she says. "It's no longer a fringe movement."

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#### Where to Buy

- Simple: Sandals, loafers and sneakers for men, women and children are available at Bancroft Clothing, 2530 Bancroft Way, and Ideas 4 Elements, 1770 Solano Ave., both in Berkeley; Whole Foods stores in Walnut Creek, San Ramon and Berkeley; and online at [Simpleshoes.com](http://Simpleshoes.com).
- Nike Considered: The corporation's line of eco-friendly sneakers are available at Foot Locker locations or wherever Nikes are sold. Also online at [Nikestore.com](http://Nikestore.com).
- Charmone: Eco-couture sandals, wedges and heels are available at Bulo, 418 Hayes St., and Smash, 2030 Chestnut St., both in San Francisco. [Charmoneshoes.com](http://Charmoneshoes.com).
- Terra Plana: Funky eco-luxury sandals, wedges and heels are available online at [Terraplana.com](http://Terraplana.com).
- Blackspot: Owners of [Adbusters.com](http://Adbusters.com) make a classic sneaker and an "Unswisher" boot, both available at [Blackspotshoes.org](http://Blackspotshoes.org).
- Beyond Skin: A British company specializing in classic handmade shoes, including bridal shoes. Available at [Beyondskin.co.uk](http://Beyondskin.co.uk).

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