

Is it OK... to use tampons Bibi van der Zee's guide to a good life

If, like me, you have just robotically bought the same type of sanitary protection for the last 20 years without looking at anything else on the shelf then, ladies, prepare for a shock. The world of Sanpro (I really love that word – so 1984) has moved into the 21st century with a vengeance. Around my computer are Alldays Discreet “breathable and scented” pantyliners, Carefree scented single-wrapped pantyliners, Boots’ own fragrant sanitary disposal bags (degradable) and Tampax compak fresh slightly-scented tampons. And what colours – Sanpro packaging doesn’t seem to be as shy as it used to be (in fact Natracare, which makes organic sanitary products, seems to be the only firm avoiding the fuchsias, violets and lime greens beloved of all the rest). What’s more, the smell is absolutely overwhelming – it’s like being drowned in a wave of fabric conditioners and air fresheners. In fact I’m going to have to put them all back in the bag now.

In the late 80s, the Women’s Environmental Network (WEN) staged a campaign that involved throwing (unused) tampons around in order to raise awareness of a few unpalatable facts about sanitary protection. The first was that production involved chlorine bleaching. Performing such a function on cotton that’s just going to be put inside you may seem entirely unnecessary but, according to Natracare, bleaching is necessary because it cleans the cotton at the same time. It’s just that chlorine bleaching, the method used at that time, is immensely polluting and WEN managed to make most manufacturers move away from this form: Procter & Gamble (Tampax), for example, now uses a process called elemental chlorine-free bleaching.

The second big problem WEN wanted to make us aware of, however, was the disposal of these things, and there, despite a long “Bag it and Bin it” campaign, they have been less

successful. I was talking to a public toilet attendant recently, and he said that people just put everything down the loo: three of the toilets he looks after were blocked because people had put nappies down them. Not only is this bewilderingly daft, given the size of a nappy, but it also makes you realise that a good percentage of women probably chuck their tampons away without a thought. The actual figures make your head hurt: 2.5m tampons are flushed down the toilet every day, as are



1.4m sanitary towels and 700,000 panty liners. And all that has to be cleaned up.

Now these new scented and lubricated doodads have arrived. Campaigner Helen Lynn reads me the label of a packet of Lil-lets Extra Comfort lubricated tampons which contain parabens, a chemical preservative. Parabens is also an oestrogen imitator. And whether it is harmful or not, the fact remains that it doesn’t break down out in the environment.

That, in fact, is the worst thing about most of these products: they are an astonishing waste of resources and will lead to horrible amounts of rubbish. Take the Tampax Compak Fresh: each tampon comes in its own plastic wrapper with its own bright blue plastic applicator. I asked P&G if this plastic is particularly biodegradable and was told that plastic applicators have been around for a long time, from which I infer – sorry if I’m wrong – that it is not. I also asked P&G if the scent is plant-based or synthetic: P&G replied that “as a matter of policy and for competitive reasons, we do not disclose the formulations of any of our products”.

It’s quite interesting to note that P&G are ranked high on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index: on the P&G website they say: “Six years ago, P&G embraced the concept of sustainable development. We challenged conventional wisdom that companies should limit their sustainability efforts to reducing the negative impacts of pollution, waste, child labor, and poor working conditions. We contended that these efforts were necessary but

not sufficient – and we stepped up to a bigger opportunity: to help achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals of safe drinking water and sanitation, reductions in child and mother mortality and morbidity, and quality of life for slum dwellers and women and girls in the developing world.”

Now, while these aims are admirable, it’s not quite what those old hippies were talking about when they came up with the idea of sustainable living. I asked P&G how blue plastic applicators chimed with its declared “commitment to being a leader in sustainable development,” and P&G told me: “P&G continues to have a commitment to sustainable development and is continually reviewing its products in every business category.”

All I suggest is that you imagine 2.5m blue plastic applicators being flushed down the toilet every day, and make up your own mind. So what can we do instead? Natracare makes 100% organic cotton tampons and sanitary towels. Serena Mackesy raved about the Mooncup in a jaunty piece for the Times recently: like the Keeper, it’s a rubber cup that sort of unfolds inside you and seals around the sides, and then you just stick it under a tap or wipe it out. Or you can even make your own sanitary towels: there’s a sewing pattern on the WEN website. So, basically, forget scented and consider paisley instead ●

Next week: Is it OK to have a bore hole?
Send your views and any new dilemmas to ethical.living@guardian.co.uk.
Leo Hickman is away.



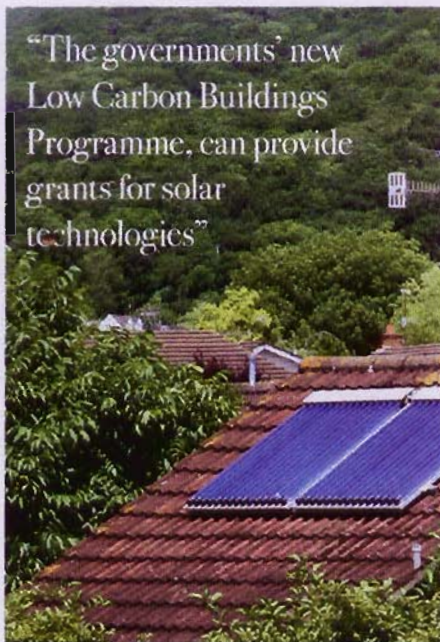


April Get fruity in the garden

Growing your own produce is fun, cheap and a great way to introduce children to the joys of green living. Start small with a few herbs on the windowsill or in a pot outside the back door and gradually increase your plot size. Think about what your family consumes most of, such as tomatoes or salad ingredients, for instance, and find out about how to grow them using books or instruction from the internet. Depending on your location and soil type most vegetables and many fruits can now be grown in the British climate. Try setting yourselves a target of experimenting with growing five new vegetables this year. Of course, producing your own compost goes hand in hand with growing vegetables. There are many great books on the subject but I don't think any of these can compete with speaking to someone who knows their onions, as it were. allotment owners are often more than happy to swap notes on what works for them and ask around your neighbours too. The simplest form of composting is probably to get a plastic bin liner and start filling it with kitchen scraps, small pieces of cardboard, leaves and grass cuttings. After six months this should be ready to use on your garden. However, there are some much more sophisticated and effective methods, including worm composting which produces a nutrient rich liquid that does wonders for the productivity of your garden.

For organic gardening ideas visit: www.gardenorganic.co.uk, organic plants and seeds can be purchased from www.organiccatalog.com and www.organicplants.co.uk. For composting tips and advice, try www.compost.org.uk, www.vermisell.co.uk and www.wiggleywigglers.co.uk.

"The governments' new Low Carbon Buildings Programme, can provide grants for solar technologies"



May Go Solar

Harness the power of the sun with a solar hot water heating system and save up to 60% on your hot water energy bills. Some local councils are now offering grants of up to £1,400 to go towards the cost of installing a system. Find out more by contacting your local council. The Government's new Low Carbon Buildings Programme, initiated in April 2006, and set to run for three years, can provide grants for microgeneration technologies for householders, community organisations, and businesses. Microgeneration is the stand alone generation of low carbon heat and/or electricity which includes Solar Water Heating Systems, Wind Turbines, Solar Photovoltaics, Ground Source Heat Pumps and others. More information can be found at www.lowcarbonbuildings.org.uk. In Scotland, readers will find details of grants available at www.est.org.uk/schri. The Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales offer advice on small scale systems together with courses on renewables. In March, visitors can attend workshops on wind power and learn how to install and test domestic photovoltaic systems. See www.cat.org.uk. Another action to take is to switch to a green electricity supplier. Try www.ecotricity.co.uk, www.good-energy.co.uk or www.greenenergyuk.com. More importantly aim to reduce electricity consumption in your home. Our top five tips are: turn the heating down by 1°C and wear warmer clothes, insulate the loft (grants are available in some areas - check with your local council), switch to low energy bulbs, don't rely on stand-by - turn computers and TVs off when not in use, wash clothes at 40°C and only run the machine when you have a full-load.



June Embrace your moontime

Half the population has periods. Menstruation is a natural and healthy process. Menstrual blood is the stuff of life itself, nourishing the growing foetus in the womb. In many cultures, starting your period (menarche) is a time for celebration, and the monthly lunar cycles are respected, honoured and embraced as a time of reflection, renewal and women's power. So why are we so hung up on the issue? Why, for so many, is it so associated with pain and negativity, surrounded by silence and secrecy? And what effect does this culture of silence have in terms of our choice of sanitary protection and its implications for health and the environment?

The average woman uses over 11,000 tampons during her menstruating years and as a nation we spend £370 million on disposable sanitary products a year. These items end up in landfill or, worse still, polluting our seas and rivers. A tampon takes six months to biodegrade whilst a sanitary pad lasts indefinitely, but we don't have to contribute to this waste mountain. There are some wonderful alternatives available, from Sea Pearls (www.seapearls.co.uk), a natural sea sponge free from dioxins and other toxins and reusable for up to six months, to the Mooncup (www.mooncup.co.uk), a silicone based reusable cup that collects blood rather than absorbing it. It contains no bleaches, deodorisers or absorbancy gels. It does not interfere with a healthy vaginal environment and is suitable for women with sensitive skin, thrush, eczema and allergies. Cotton washable pads are also available from many companies that stock washable nappies. See our marketplace section. Feeling crafty? At www.wen.org.uk you can find instructions on how to make your own.