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Logo La-La Land

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They're shaped like tiny leaves, trees, and stylized drawings of Mother Earth, thumbnail-sized logos in every imaginable shade of green and plastered on every imaginable product.

The common term for these logos is 'eco-labels,' and they're meant to help consumers sift through questionable environmental claims, offering a stamp of approval for tissue, detergent or toilet cleaner that talks the talk and walks the walk on sustainability.

But their rising popularity can be as much a hindrance as a help. Stores are saturated with eco-labels, and it's tough to tell one leaf logo from the next. How's a shopper supposed to separate products with real enviro-cred from those branded with basic self-promotion?

"This has become a very crowded space, and between the certifications and labelling that exist and the marketing (and) the green marketing of the products themselves, consumers have demonstrated that they're highly confused by the claims that are made on packaging," said Jodie Van Horn, spokeswoman for GoodGuide, a site that ranks eco-products.

There's a baffling array of environmental certifications on the market, especially if you buy goods made elsewhere. One package of trash bags at a local health store bore three different 'compostable' logos, a fourth

for the type of plant-based plastic used in the bags, and a fifth for what turned out to be a Norwegian organic certifier.

Even companies with good environmental reputations can be prone to vague claims, and sometimes stamps that look like eco-labels are just extra branding by the manufacturer.

Getting past the greenwashing is "a real challenge for consumers," said Trevor Bowden, co-founder of Big Room, a Vancouver startup that runs eco-label listing site Ecolabelling.org.

Ecolabelling.org has tallied 274 eco-labels so far, 23 of them specific to Canada. The goal is to boost logo transparency, said Bowden, telling shoppers whether they come from a trusted organization and if the claims were approved by a third-party auditor, for example.

"If greenwashing is not tackled head-on, and consumers aren't able to trust these claims that are being made about green products, then we risk undermining green markets," he said.

If you're looking for a more detailed system, www.goodguide.com is developing an exhaustive ranking of environmentally friendly products, from nutrition and environmental impacts to whether they're ranked by eco-labels. All the data is boiled down into a 1-10 score, and the criteria is

listed on their site for shoppers who care to look. The company has rated 70,000 products so far, including cleaners, food and toys.

"The end goal is to consolidate all of that noise into one rating and allow the consumer to make better purchasing decisions," Van Horn said.

Few existing labels have total acceptance, even those with long histories. The Forest Stewardship Council is favoured by some environmental groups but criticized by others for not doing enough to protect old-growth forests, and some have accused TransFair, a fair trade certifier, of compromising on its labour standards by dealing with major retail chains.

For customers, eco-labels can still provide some guidance in a world awash in dubious green claims. Label scrutinizers like Bowden just wish there were fewer of them.

"We need to make it clear and easy for people to recognize what's a good green purchasing choice," he said. "The proliferation of labels can obfuscate some of these easy choices."

Certified Organic:

Numerous companies certify organic goods, and you'll see a bewildering variety of logos on store shelves. But over time many will likely be replaced by the Canada Organic logo following new regulations that came into force this summer. In the interim, organic shoppers should look for a certifier listed on the product package, and make sure the name is valid. Common certifiers include Quality Assurance International, Pro-Cert and, for American products, the USDA seal. More information at:

www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/orgbio/orgbioe.shtml.

Environmental Choice / EcoLogo:

EcoLogo is North America's oldest environmental certifier, developed by Environment Canada nearly two decades ago. The program certifies items proven to tread more lightly on the earth because of how they're made, used or disposed of. Thousands of EcoLogo products are sold in Canada. More information at: www.terrachoice-certified.com.

In-store brands:

What about the in-store labels, such as Safeway's Bright Green brand or the President's Choice G.R.E.E.N line at Superstore? Most such labels have their own eco-friendly criteria, and some, such as Safeway and Superstore, have their products reviewed by outside parties. But it isn't easy for shoppers to know how the goods are ranked or what makes them green. Bowden said some in-store brands have the traits of good eco-logos, such as third-party verification, but Ecolabelling.org prefers labels separate from retailers.

Lake-Friendly:

You'll see this Manitoba-specific logo on products in cottage country, from Sangsters in Selkirk to Lockport Grocery. It relies on EcoLogo criteria, and is aimed at reducing the nutrient load plaguing Lake Winnipeg, caused in part by the ingredients in common household items. More information at: www.lakefriendly.ca.

Forest Stewardship Council:

You're likely to see this label on paper products, from printer paper to tissues. FSC certification means the paper and wood used in the product come from what the organization dubs "responsibly managed forests," and sticks to standards including protection of waterways, wildlife and wildlife habitat and reduced pesticide use. Details at: www.fsccanada.org.

Fair Trade Certified:

You might know TransFair Canada's logo from coffee or chocolate, but it's also on everything from herbs to cereal boxes. Fair trade principles include paying producers in developing countries higher wages and more for their goods. The certifier also favours sustainable farming. More information at: www.transfair.ca.

ENERGY STAR:

The ENERGY STAR logo is recognized worldwide, and means an appliance or product is significantly more energy efficient than its run-of-the-mill competitors. Fridges have to be at least 20 per cent more efficient than minimum federal requirements, for example, and compact fluorescent light bulbs with the star use 75 per cent less energy than incandescents. More information at: <http://oee.nrcan.gc.ca/residential/energystar-portal.cfm>.

Compostable:

The U.S. Composting Council logo, or the newer Composting Council of Canada logo means a product or its packaging will break down into earth-friendly compost in a set time frame – in Canada, it has to break down by 90 per cent in 84 days. Most bioplastics are meant for large-scale composting operations, and won't always break down in your backyard bin. More information at: www.compostable.info.