

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Sharing Your Eco-Love

Dear EcoGirl: This Valentine's Day, how can I express my love for both my sweetie and the planet? *Signed, An Ardent Eco-Suitor*

Dear Ardent: Ah, love, love. And, luckily in this modern era, we can celebrate not just the delights of romantic love, but also our affection and appreciation for our friends, pets, wildlife, community — and certainly all life on earth.

So, yes, here are some easy ways you can eco-upgrade your amorous expressions, embodying your values while revealing that oh-so-attractive eco-awareness that so many beloveds admire.

Chocolate kisses

Chocolate, one of our favorite indulgences, also unfortunately (like so many mainstream foods) is often produced in ways that harm people and the planet.

For example, most cacao beans (chocolate's foundation) are grown using toxic pesticides in tropical locales where rainforests were cleared to create monoculture plantations that no longer offer shade habitat to migratory songbirds and other wildlife. Plus, workers typically labor in dangerous conditions for inadequate wages.

Luckily, we have options that are eco-wiser, healthier for workers, and even tastier! So, after you learn your giftee's preferences (e.g., milk chocolate or dark, dietary restrictions, etc.), head to your local health food store and choose from their earth-friendly selection of organic, fair trade, and vegan varieties. Here are two that I recommend:

- **Shaman Chocolates.** My personal favorite is dark chocolate with raspberries, and all varieties are organic, fair trade, and support the cultural survival of Mexico's indigenous Huichol people. These shamanic natives have long considered chocolate sacred, using it in ceremonies "to

show their love for Mother Earth." How cool is that? Look at the store or see www.shamanchocolates.com.

- **Sjaaks Organic Chocolates.** This local organic fair trade chocolate (made in Eureka) comes in various forms, including bars, truffles, hearts, boxes, and holiday packaging. They even have vegan choices! You can buy Sjaaks in stores, online, and at their Petaluma warehouse (by appointment). More information is at www.sjaaks.com, 775-2434.

Rose blossoms

OK, so now on to the other half of this famed heart duo, roses. But certainly flowers are natural, right? Well, sadly, while they start out that way, they're often doused with toxic pesticides during growing and shipping, and regulations are less-protective than for food.

I discovered this personally many years ago, when a suitor's lovely bouquet gave me terrible headaches, and I reluctantly had to banish it to the porch, only to be viewed from afar.

Of course, whatever toxic dose I received, the workers must've risked worse, and indeed most of our cut flowers come from countries such as Columbia and China where workers have their health compromised by toxics while earning low wages and receiving scant worker protection. Yuck, who wants to encourage that? Plus pesticides are indeed found on the flowers, making them smell much less sweet.

So look for eco-flower options, starting with organic roses, at your health food store or online. See for instance pioneer Organic Bouquet, www.organicbouquet.com, or www.californiaorganicflowers.com.

You'll also see other flower labels touting ecological claims, but look carefully at their specifics. Do they actually say "no toxics allowed"? And do they have third-party certification? For example, VeriFlora and Whole

Trade labels speak about the environment and workers, and perhaps they're an improvement, but they don't have strong statements about avoiding toxics. That's why I value, and encourage you to first support, the solid and clear commitments of the organic standard.

For an engaging article about workers in industrial versus organic flower operations, check out <http://audubonmagazine.org/features0801/organics.html>.

And beyond

From here, who knows where your eco-gifting imagination might go? Perhaps an organic potted flower will fit your vision, say from Harmony Farm Supply & Nursery (www.harmonyfarm.com, 823-1925). Or a romantic meal featuring organic local cuisine. And a walk in nature's freshness can help spark that vibrant snuggly togetherness. (More gift ideas are on my website.)

And, along the way, I encourage you to savor the joy that comes from nurturing that which nourishes us all in oh so many ways.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl: Encouraging the eco-hero in everyone."

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