

Is organic the best?

While there are many skincare products labelled natural or organic, industry guidelines are still a work in progress



Gladys Chung

Walk into any beauty department or personal-care store and chances are you will find an ever-widening array of cosmetic products that claim to be "organic" or "natural". But can you always trust labels that claim to be both?

Probably not, says Mr Amarjit Sahota, managing director of Organic Monitor, a London-based specialist research and consulting company which focuses on global sustainable product industries.

"Asian consumers don't really know what organic means. It is a sustainable form of farming. There is a lot of confusion," he says.

There is no single official definition of what makes a product organic, but generally, organic cosmetic ingredients are those that come from organic plants, while natural cosmetic ingredients are those obtained only from plants, animals and substances of micro-biological or mineral origin.

Mr Sahota adds that in Asia, the absence of mainstream retailers of such products and a lack of large natural food shop chains leads to a disorganised sector where there is strong competition for shelf space with pseudo-natural brands.

Small speciality retailers which carry a relatively sizeable range of reputable organic and natural beauty products in Singapore include SuperNature, Bud Cosmetics and Pure Tincture.

Mislabelling is one of the biggest problems.

Mr Sahota says: "In Asia, many brands put self-designated logos on their products. It could just be a conventional formulation with one organic ingredient and it will have a large organic logo on the label. Or, it could be that the product's name includes the word 'organic' in one form or another, but there is nothing organic inside the bottle."

"And there are also cases where brands use false logos and seals on their products. This greenwashing is more common in Asia than in other parts of the world."

Greenwashing is a term coined by environmentalists to describe products and services which claim to be environmentally friendly when they are not.

Mr Sahota estimates the global natural and organic cosmetics market to be worth US\$11.7 billion (S\$16.6 billion), with the United States and Germany being the largest markets. He was in town last month to give a presentation at the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance



Association of Singapore's Annual Workshop on the natural and organic market in ASEAN.

The good news is the confusion over organic and natural cosmetics in the region may be solved by the middle of next year, says Dr Alain Khaat, president of the association and vice-president of technical and scientific affairs at the Asean Cosmetic Association.

The International Standard Guidelines on Technical Definitions and Criteria for Natural and Organic Cosmetic Ingredients are in the final rounds of a six-year-long discussion involving representatives from countries such as Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and Thailand.

The guidelines will cover topics that include the definition of a natural or organic cosmetic ingredient and the amount of organic ingredients that a product should contain to be labelled as organic. This move will mean major changes for the industry.

According to Dr Khaat, when the standards are published, they may be adopted by the Asean Cosmetic Committee as guidelines to control products that are imported into and exported out of Asean.

If and when the standards are adopted by local regulators, the standard guidelines will be used as a reference to check on claims

made on a label. Companies can also use the guidelines to formulate their products so they can make the right claims on their labels.

RISE IN DEMAND
There are no official figures on the market for such organic beauty products in Singapore. But there are now more skincare labels – claiming to be natural or organic-based – on the shelves.

About five new brands have been launched every quarter in the last two years. Some of the latest ones include Botanico Garden, Stenders and Bottega Verde.

The businesses of local organic and natural cosmetic speciality retailers are growing.

Mr Eric Chew opened his first Bud Cosmetics store, a 260 sq ft space at Novena Square 2 in 2008 with just three labels – British brand The Organic Pharmacy, Logona from Germany and American label 100 Per Cent Pure.

Today, he has two more stores – a 600 sq ft outlet at Mandarin Gallery and a 300 sq ft shop at Paya Lebar Square. Bud Cosmetics carries 16 brands – at least seven are exclusive – including South Korean label Isoi and Mukti Organics from Australia. It also offers organic and natural facial and body treatments at the Mandarin Gallery outlet.

In October, Pure Tincture launched its second store and beauty

studio, a 500 sq ft space in Tras Street. It also operates a 600 sq ft space at The Adelphi. Pure Tincture started in 2005 with three organic brands (Sukipure and Osea from the United States and Santaverde Natural Cosmetics from Germany). It stocks 11 labels – at least five are exclusive – including London-based Pai and Martina Gebhardt from Germany, and offers 25 kinds of facials.

Even organic food grocer SuperNature at Forum The Shopping Mall, which opened in 2001 and is owned by luxury conglomerate Como Group, has an entire section devoted to personal care products.

It sells at least 12 organic and natural labels, such as American brands Rahua, Simply Organic Beauty, Nature's Gate and Coslys from France.

Ms Liza Rowan, an Irish nutritionist who has been based in Singapore for the past four years, says she no longer has to stock up on organic cosmetics whenever she or her husband travels to Europe.

"These days, I can get whatever I need here. It is a little more expensive than in Europe and the range is limited, but at least what I want is available in certain stores," says the 49-year-old.

GOING AU NATUREL
Mr Chew of Bud Cosmetics and Ms Helen Lien, founder of Pure

Tincture, say Singaporeans make up more than 70 per cent of their customers. Their regular ones tend to be in their mid-20s onwards and are usually savvy about organic products.

They add that organic and natural beauty products these days are more competitively priced and have improved formulas.

Mr Chew points out that many organic concoctions are no longer rudimentary as customers have become more discerning and expect the organic products to perform as well as non-organic products from big beauty brands.

"In the past, an organic product was made of raw ingredients. One just has to whip it up and if it smells nice, it can be sold. Now, organic products are infused with botanical cosmeceuticals."

And while organic food is generally still at least 30 per cent more expensive than non-organic food (because eco certification is expensive, among other reasons), the prices of organic and natural cosmetics are now comparable to those made mainly with synthetic ingredients.

Mr Chew attributes this to economies of scale and the fact that premium skincare products are usually priced higher, regardless of whether they are natural or organic or neither.

Traditionally, life-changing

events – such as pregnancy or serious illness – also lead consumers to switch to organic and natural cosmetic products because the products are believed to be better for one's well-being, notes Mr Chew.

When Ms Brenda Lim, who is in her early 40s, was diagnosed with breast cancer three years ago, she started on an organic beauty regime to complement her strict organic vegan diet.

"I wanted to stay as healthy as possible and avoid anything processed or artificial," says the lawyer.

Three years on and fully recovered, she no longer sticks to an organic vegan diet, but continues to use only organic skincare products from brands such as John Masters Organics and The Organic Pharmacy.

She says: "The products are much gentler and they make a big difference to my skin. It feels healthy inside out and has a radiant glow."

Many consumers also turn to organic and natural cosmetics to deal with their sensitive skin.

Ms Lien says: "Most of my customers have rosacea, eczema, thin skin, adult acne or contact dermatitis and they don't respond well to over-the-counter products and those from pharmacies."

However, adjunct associate professor Steven Thng, senior consultant and head of the pigment

clinic at the National Skin Centre, says natural and organic skincare products are not always a fail-proof way to treat intolerant skin.

He says: "Generally, organic or natural skincare products are safer as they are deemed to have fewer toxic effects and reduce one's chance of developing an allergic reaction. However, that does not mean one will not develop allergic reactions to or be irritated by these products."

He adds that at the National Skin Centre, doctors do see patients developing allergic reactions to plants, plant saps and citrus fruit extracts in organic and natural formulas. "This is especially so if one is exposed to the sun after coming into contact with organic products because some allergies are not direct allergens but photo-allergens. Sunlight activates the allergies and without sunlight, they are not allergic."

Products with synthetic chemicals in them are not always bad either, he says. "Despite higher incidences of allergic reactions, chemicals are usually more effective than organic ingredients as they are synthesized to achieve the effect desired. So there are always pros and cons when one chooses to use organic or natural products versus chemical-based ones," he adds.

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10 natural and organic products worth checking out

1
The Organic Pharmacy Antioxidant Face Firming Serum, \$212, from Bud Cosmetics, 03-32 Mandarin Gallery, 333A Orchard, tel: 6733-5782
Made with rosehip oil, carrot, sunflower oil, lemon, sweet orange and grapefruit to lift and tone skin.

2
Julius Gold Emulsion Day, \$415, from the Beauty-i pop-up store at B1-25/26 Scotts Square, tel: 9234-3940
Contains an alchemical essence of gold, fermented wild flower honey, bee's wax, bee pollen, St John's wort oil and royal jelly to treat sensitive and irritated skin.

3
Biossential Bio Super Serum Anti-age Serum Five, \$145, from the Beauty-i pop-up store
Blended with sunflower, rape, hazelnut, apricot and rose oils to slow down signs of ageing.

4
John Masters Organics Spearmint and Meadowsweet Scalp Stimulating Shampoo, \$36, from Bud Cosmetics
Concocted with organic-certified ingredients – spearmint, meadowsweet, eucalyptus oil, soya protein and guar gum – to detoxify the scalp and add volume to hair.

5
Juice Beauty Blemish Clearing Serum, \$52.50, from Bud Cosmetics
All the products by the brand are blended with organic antioxidant rich plant juices. This product is made to unclog pores and reduce breakouts. Gwyneth Paltrow is the creative director of the brand.

6
Pai Rosehip BioRegenerate Oil, \$50, from Pure Tincture, 02-01 Pure Tincture Studio @ Tras, 68 Tras Street, tel: 6222-0267
A potent form of cold-pressed rosehip oil made to tone and condition skin and reduce the appearance of fine lines.

7
Tata Harper Rejuvenating Face Sunscreen & Primer, \$72, from Pure Tincture
Winner of the 2011 Allure Best In Beauty award, given to top products by US beauty magazine Allure, this anti-ageing serum is formulated with 29 natural and active ingredients.

8
Suntegrity Natural Moisturizing Face Sunscreen & Primer, \$72, from Pure Tincture
This winner of the Allure Best of Beauty award in 2013 is a chemical-free sunscreen that does not leave a white cast on the skin. It also contains red algae and organic aloe vera, jojoba, sunflower, pomegranate, cucumber and green tea extracts to calm and protect skin.

9
Vita Coco Extra Virgin 100% Raw Cold Pressed Organic Coconut Oil, \$20, from selected supermarkets such as Cold Storage
This fatty acid-rich oil can be eaten and also used as a skin and hair moisturiser.

10
Dr Jackson's 05 Face And Eye Essence, US\$101 (S\$148), from Net-A-Porter
A blend of rose water and Roman camellia to soothe skin, kigelia to keep it elastic and vitamin C-rich baobab to protect skin.

Organic and natural – what you need to know

There is no single official definition of an organic product.

An international organic standard is in the works, says Dr Alain Khaat, president of the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association of Singapore and vice-president of technical and scientific affairs at the Asean Cosmetic Association. There are also no official regulations on labelling products "organic," he adds. But if someone contests the labelling, the brand will have to prove that its label is accurate.

There are private companies that audit brands and certify the level of organic content in products. But the standards used between the companies are different, so the same brand may get different results.

Certifying companies consumers can trust, says Dr Khaat, include Cosmos, EcoCert, Natrue, NSF and BDH Certified Natural Cosmetics. Look out for their logos on the labels. And make sure the certification logo applies to the entire product and not just one ingredient in it.

Organic products come from organic plants. Dr Khaat says that only plants can be classified as organic, not animal-origin ingredients.

Organic agriculture is defined loosely as crops grown with only natural fertilisers and pesticides. Again, because there is no official global definition of what is "organic," a crop which is classified organic in one country may not be categorised as such in another.

Organic ingredients do not necessarily guarantee an organic end-product – this depends on how the ingredients are processed.

Natural cosmetic ingredients are obtained only from plants, animals and those of microbiological or mineral origin. Ingredients sourced from fossil fuels are excluded from the definition, says Dr Khaat. These include vaseline and paraffin.

Natural products should contain a high content of natural ingredients. The exact amount will be revealed once the international guidelines are set. And increasingly, the focus is put on sustainable development. This means, amongst other things, ensuring the plants are renewable, the energy comes from renewable resources and packaging is properly recycled.

All reputable companies make sure the product is safe before it is placed in the market. Safety assessment is a mandatory requirement.

This applies to natural or synthetic ingredients and products. The regulatory authorities check that this is done properly.

Do your research. Read up on the brands. Besides certifications, Mr Eric Chew, founder of organic and natural cosmetics speciality store Bud Cosmetics, looks out for a few things when he picks the brands he stocks.

These include a composition of at least 95-99 per cent natural ingredients in the products, the brand's commitment to producing good, clean products that work, and fair trade ingredients.

Synthetic chemicals are not always bad. Natural ingredients are not as effective as synthetic chemicals when it comes to products such as skin lightening and sun protection ones, says adjunct associate professor Steven Thng, senior consultant and head of the pigment clinic at the National Skin Centre.

That said, certain synthetic chemical-based products do lead to a higher incidence of allergic reactions, he adds. They include cinnamonyl alcohol, citronellol, eugenol, hexyl cinnamyl, hydroxyacetone, hydroxyisohexyl-3-cyclohexene carboxaldehyde, d-limonene and linalool.

Some chemicals can also be carcinogenic. But these are usually banned by the Health Sciences Authority, says Associate Professor Thng.

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Strong Indian appetite for Western fashion

NEW DELHI • Riffling through sweaters in India's first Gap store in a glitzy New Delhi mall, 21-year-old Ridhi Goel says her grandmother does not mind how she dresses, as long as it is not too revealing.

"She's fine with me wearing Western clothes such as a shirt, but not jeans and a cropped top," said the journalism student, her grey leggings contrasting sharply with her mother's colourful kurta. "All my family members wear Indian clothes, but I find them too uncomfortable. I think maybe there is a generational divide."

Most women in India still wear traditional dress such as saris or salwar kameez, but the picture is changing and on city streets, dazzling silks mingle with loosed T-shirts and jeans.

Young people's appetite for Western clothes has led a fresh flurry of foreign brands to open

stores in India in the past few months, including American chain Gap and Sweden's H&M.

Others are expanding fast, including popular Spanish retailer Zara and British high-street staple Marks & Spencer, which last month opened its 50th shop in India, its biggest market outside Britain.

Urbanisation, a growing middle class, rising disposable incomes and one of the youngest populations in the world make India hard to ignore.

"The time has come for Western wear to have exponential growth," Mr J. Suresh, managing director of textile group Arvind Lifestyle Brands, Gap's partner in India, said. "If you look at any girl born after 1990, she will be wearing Western wear. That is the generation coming into college, their first job. They will be completely in Western wear."



While globally, women are the biggest shoppers, in India, men's clothing dominates, with 42 per cent of the US\$38-billion (S\$54-billion) market last year, according to consultancy Technopak.

Shoppers are also younger – the average customer targeted by Gap in its US stores is 35 years old, but his Indian counterpart is five to 10

years younger, Mr Suresh said.

Gap had a head start in India, thanks to Bollywood megastar Shah Rukh Khan, whose ubiquitous orange hoodie in 1990s hit Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (Something Happens) handed the brand a ready-made following.

But it is young Indian women, increasingly affluent and joining

the workforce in expanding numbers, who are driving change, with data showing sales of womenswear growing faster than menswear.

And while Western clothes make up only about a quarter of Indian womenswear, their sales are outpacing those of traditional dress.

A Marks & Spencer spokesman cited its Indigo denim range and

lingerie as two of its best-performing lines in India, with more than 300,000 bras sold in 2014-2015.

Mr Devangshu Dutta, chief executive of Third Eyesight, a retail consultancy in Delhi, said: "As an increasing number of women move into white-collar and blue-collar roles, they are also adopting Western attire."

More negatively, media stereotypes of overseas fashion as a proxy for "a modern thought process" and conversely, Indian clothing as "backward or repressive, certainly an important influencer", he added.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi is famous for wearing a short-sleeved kurta, he is in the minority among India's men. They already dress predominantly in Western clothes, as do children, whose parents see it as a practical choice for school uniforms.

For foreign brands, fast-growing India is a welcome change from sluggish markets such as Britain and a loosening of foreign direct investment laws has made it easier to open shops.

Yet the retail landscape in India is hard to navigate, leading some

entrants, including British department store Debenhams, to pull out.

Foreign newcomers also face competition from Indian-owned, Western-style brands such as Allen Solly or Louis Philippe, which are more familiar with the nuances of the market.

The successful ones adapt their ranges – Marks & Spencer "stretches" its seasons to cater for the long Indian summer and offers polo shirts in four times as many colours as in Britain.

Others aggressively cut prices. In a country where the average monthly wage is US\$215, according to 2012 figures from the International Labour Organization, brands that are mid-market in Europe or the US become much higher end in India.

Dressed in a pink polo shirt and jeans in the capital's new H&M store, airline officer Sunil Bassi, 49, says he is "not fussy" about his clothes and came to shop for his wife.

"Obviously, Western fashion is very popular. How many people in here do you see wearing Indian clothes?" he said.

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