

# LOW VOCs FOR MY UNDIES

Refinishing furniture the low-toxic way BY CHELSEA FRYHOFF

**T**he nightstand I use as my underwear drawer has seen better days. Its cream paint was cracked and chipped from drawers to feet. It was time for a new look, and my undies deserved it.

But why throw away this converted nightstand when I can refinish it and make it the one-of-a-kind underwear drawer my lingerie would be proud to linger in?

Mind made up, I recruited my friend Jacob and we headed to the Lowe's out on West 11th. Since neither of us have ever refinished a piece of furniture, we went with what we knew. (If there's a local business that can help with this sort of project, drop *EW* a note and let us know). Once we got to the store, overwhelmed by our options, we rang the help button at the paint counter and waited.

A sales representative, whose name tag said she was "Marsha," appeared out of nowhere in her red mesh vest and asked us if we were the ones who needed help.

We told her our mission of refinishing my underwear drawer and she led us to the paint-stripping aisle. Choosing these types of products was harder than I thought; there were so many types. But I wanted this to be an environmentally friendly refinishing project, so I told the nice lady in red that I wanted to use a nontoxic paint stripper.

Marsha gave me a confused look. So I changed my request to a product with the lowest amount of toxins possible. We decided on Zinsser Bulls Eye Paint and Finish



Remover, a soy-based product with a VOC level of 211 grams per liter.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, VOCs are volatile organic compounds emitted as gases from paint and paint removal products, as well as cleaning supplies, pesticides and permanent markers, to name a few. These VOCs contribute to ozone and smog formation, and are linked to respiratory illness and memory impairment, says ConsumerReports.org.

When buying paint and other home improvement supplies, look for the number on the label that states the num-

ber of VOCs, not just "low-VOC." ConsumerReports.org says the federal VOC limits are now set at 250 grams per liter for flat paint and 380 grams per liter for other paint. Shop for products with these VOC levels or lower. It also says the lower the VOCs, the lower the performance of the product, but my underwear and I prefer the less toxic options.

Marsha also helped us find an environmentally friendly paint by Olympic with zero VOCs. She was able to tint the "Environmentally Preferred" paint to the color I wanted — black.

Lowe's didn't have paint primer available in the amount we needed, so we found a generic paint primer from Sherwin-Williams with a VOC level of 41 grams per liter.

Fast-forward to Jacob's backyard: We started spraying the paint stripper on my underwear drawer.

Tip: Even with a soy-based product, be sure to wear personal protective equipment, like gloves, to protect your skin. A facemask to help avoid breathing those VOCs is also a good idea.

Once everything, including myself, was covered in the paint stripping slime (remember the gloves) we let the product do its work and left it to soak over night.

The next day we scraped off all of the cream-colored paint and started to sand the now naked underwear drawer. Once everything was sanded and smooth, which took about four hours, I wiped everything with a damp paper towel and prepared to paint.

Since the primer and paint were environmentally friendly, they had virtually no odor. I was able to avoid the rain and apply these to the clean and sanded wood inside my dry apartment.

Throughout the four days that it took to finish this project, there was definitely a lot of swearing and some moments when I questioned my decision to take on a task like this one. But after all the manual labor, I love how my underwear drawer looks and, I know my undies will be happy with their revamped low-VOC home. **EW**

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