

Colorful, Stylish Furniture Made from HDPE Closes the Plastic Recycling Loop

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Summer-like weather is here and there is nothing better than kicking back on the beach or close to a pool. Why not kick back on some recycled plastic? There are a number of U.S.-based companies that manufacture outdoor furniture from high-density polyethylene (HDPE). HDPE is made from recycled plastic milk and water jugs.

By purchasing furniture made from HDPE, one can help to close the recycling loop. In fact, at the end of its life, the furniture can be recycled and made into new furniture. From a design standpoint, there are literally hundreds of appealing color and style combinations from which to choose.

According to Denise Kallas, president of Sugar Grove, Ill.-based Freedom Outdoor Furniture, milk and water jugs are purchased by companies that contract with municipalities that collect the items. The companies clean up the waste, melt it down, add colorants and UV stabilizers, and then extrude the material into plastic lumber. Furniture manufacturers then purchase that lumber and craft it into useable furniture and other items using conventional woodworking tools. The percentage of HDPE post-consumer recycled content can run as high as 98 percent, several suppliers said. The higher the percentage, the better.

Jim Chew, president of Environmental Specialty Products, Corona, Calif., says outdoor furniture made from HDPE is heavy duty but has a lightweight look. The furniture is easy to clean, can withstand climate extremes and will not fade more than 4 percent over a 10-year period. UV stabilizers prevent fading. Because HDPE is a naturally flexible polymer, it will mold to a body. Most manufacturers offer lengthy warranties against cracking, breaking, splintering or peeling.

Sturdy to Stand the Test of Time

'The material is not going to break down or fall apart,' says Clay Rassi, in charge of sales and marketing for Poly-Wood, Syracuse, Ind., which makes more than 160 different types of products.

How does the furniture compare in cost to other outdoor types? Chew says it tends to cost more than cedar or redwood products but is less expensive than teak.

'We are competitively priced,' Kallas says, who added that dining sets, bar height sets, Adirondack style chairs and Chaise lounge chairs have been of particular interest to her hotel customers lately.

Annie Riphenburg, executive director of brand development for Great Lakes Specialty Products, Oconomowoc, Wis., says her company has seen interest pick up recently from high-end hotels looking to not only purchase furniture, but also outdoor recycling stations and towel stations.

'We are able to create some really attractive pieces for guests to use in an outdoor environment,' Riphenburg says.

Freedom Outdoor Furniture's Kallas offered some tips to remember when purchasing furniture made from HDPE.

'Determine whether or not the furniture is well supported,' she says. 'Without adequate bracing, you will get sway. Look at the bottom of it. Is there bracing every 16 inches? What kind of hardware is used? Is it stainless steel? Are edges rounded? Are the screws countersunk?'

Environmental Benefits Add Up

Furniture and other items made by companies listed above are made in the United States, which helps the environment by reducing the number of energy miles spent in shipping. Plastic, which typically would take generations to degrade, is removed from the waste stream and given new life. During manufacturing, scraps can be fed right back into the making of the product, further eliminating waste. In fact, Poly-Wood's Rassi says his company has a zero scrap rate.

'People are really environmentally conscious right now,' Kallas says. 'This is one way to help the environment. Everybody has to help close the loop.'

'From a sustainability standpoint, this type of furniture has no comparison,' Environmental Specialty Products' Chew emphasizes.

When considering furniture made from HDPE, think about your indoor spaces as well. There are many comfortable and stylish options available.

This article first appeared on the Green Lodging News website. To sign up to receive the weekly Green Lodging News newsletter, go to www.greenlodgingnews.com. Glenn Hasek can be reached at greenlodgingnews@aol.com.

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