



# Meet your greens

It's not easy being green... or is it? Forget the mung beans and bulldozer chains of yesteryear, modern environmentalism is stylish, practical and relevant to everyday life. By Kate de Brito. Photographed by Christopher Morris

**T**hey're young, enthusiastic and out to save the world. Meet Australia's new greens - fashion and furniture designers, architects, winemakers and campaigners who exude confidence and inspire others with their modern take on environmentalism. While their predecessors were characterised by their dreadlocks, tree-hugging and hemp clothing, these new-era greens embrace style along with sustainability.

A report this year by the Australia Institute suggested today's youth are less environmentally aware than their parents and less likely to recycle or take action to avoid environmental damage. But there are young guns offering plenty of inspiration. Passionate about environmental issues, whether it's collecting cans, worm farming or taking on companies for using toxic materials, this mob is determined to paint the town green.

## MANDA EPTON

### Co-owner Maud N Lil fashion label

Fashion designer Manda Epton's devotion to the environment is infectious, but there is nothing meek about her ambition. "We're not barefoot hippies who've come down from the bush and said, 'Let's have a business.' We're professional designers who happen to make conscious choices about sustainability."

The "business" is Maud N Lil, run by Epton with business partner Vicki Norman. It is one of a handful of Australia's organic-cotton-only clothing lines, producing underwear, soft toys and home clothes. The company's name is a tribute to the women of their grandmothers' era who were natural recyclers and environmentalists, re-using everything from tin foil to jam jars.

Initially, the pair struggled to find a steady supply of Australian organic cotton. Three years ago they decided to move production overseas. "We realised that, for the moment, organic was the most important part of the business and we dropped the 'Australian made'," says Epton.

Born and raised in England, Epton, 37, became "green" after writing a thesis on the environmental impact of the textile industry. "Textiles is the seventh largest industry in the world and one of the most pollutive. The more I found out, the more I wanted to do something about it," she says.

After migrating to Australia in 1992, the fashion and textiles graduate applied for a youth business initiative grant to start an eco-friendly fashion label. "At the time, I only half believed myself, but they gave me a grant and it all started from there. We realised we couldn't change the world, so we decided to specialise in designing beautiful products from organic cotton."

Most people would be shocked to realise the damage caused by their \$20 cotton T-shirt, she adds. Think pesticides and defoliants used during cotton farming and chemicals and dyes used in manufacturing. "It isn't easy to do things the right way, but it's not a hobby business. We plan to make it one of the best labels in the world."

Thinking big and thinking positive are cornerstones of Epton's approach. At home, Epton recycles, uses low-energy lighting and phosphate-free washing powder, and she feeds her food scraps to her worm farm. "Sometimes I feel

overwhelmed about the state of the environment," she says. "I call them my 'green blue days.' I used to lie awake at night but now I accept the things I can change and do what I can."

## LAWSON ARMSTRONG

### Organic vineyard manager

On the face of it Lawson Armstrong seems more rugby captain than feral farmer. He grew up in western Victoria on a farm, but these days you'll find him working among the organic vineyards of Kinkedwood in NSW's Hunter Valley, owned by Rod and Suzanne Windrim.

Although organic wine is his abiding passion, he admits to also being a little obsessed with recycling. While working in Western Australia's Margaret River he thought nothing of travelling 50kms to take his waste to a recycling depot. "Everything I do, I try to do as environmentally consciously as possible. I don't waste anything and that sets me in a good frame of mind," says Armstrong, 30. And it's a matter of pride that he can produce a top-shelf wine without chemicals.

At home with his fiancée, food scraps are divided up between the chooks, compost and worm farm so that nothing goes to waste. "The only thing that goes in the bin is the odd bit of Glad-Wrap," says the rugby-playing greenie.

After gaining a degree in viticulture, Armstrong worked in the Margaret River for an organic wine label before bringing his talents to the Hunter. "One of the hardest things to get your head around is that you can't tell the difference between organic and non-organic crops. But down in the soil biology, everything is different," he says. "Normal wine has a fairly clean and green image but the fungicides, pesticides and fungicides that go into making wine don't appear on the label."

Going green doesn't happen overnight. Returning natural fertility to soil can take years. "Initially there may be more costs and effort, but after that you don't have to put chemicals into the soil to make it fertile," says Armstrong.

"Now, though, I can have my family out among the vines and don't have to worry. I feel comfortable knowing the people working in the vineyard are not going to be affected by certain fungicides and pesticides."

Armstrong's greatest worry is what he sees as a lack of education among young people about environmental issues. He advocates more education in schools and universities to create awareness. "I've been to seminars on composting and out of a hundred people there will be about half a dozen young people," he says. "Attitudes are changing but it would be nice to see government introduce incentives, like subsidising solar power. "At times it does feel overwhelming and it seems like it's really hard to find a solution so I just try to do what I can personally and with my work - and if I can help other people, I do."

## EOGHAN LEWIS Architect

Don't expect to find biscuits in the tea room at Eoghan Lewis's edgy Sydney architecture firm, Supply Design. For Lewis, 35, being environmentally conscious means accepting that sometimes less is more and that you have to put on a jumper rather than turn up the heater.

"Less is a beautiful word, you know. I am a very big believer in quality. Fewer things, but better things," says Lewis. Fewer things also means less consumption and less waste.

It may not be a popular ideology in a consumer society, but it works just fine for Lewis. Although he shies away from the term "green architect" or "eco-architecture", he has picked up a solid reputation as a big picture designer who lives by his environmental principles.

"I don't like the label because I don't believe in just one issue. I'm suspicious of one-issue firms. And I get disappointed when people talk and then get in their four-wheel drive and head home."

"For me, it [being environmental] is embodied in everything we do. Some clients share our ideas and in some cases we are educating clients."

Educating clients may include explaining the financial and environmental savings to be made by tapping into a building's "intrinsic intelligence", such as how its position and orientation can save on heating and cooling costs. But, he admits, there's no such thing as a free lunch - or a free building. "If you use green principles you are still probably going to have to change your ideas of comfort to some degree, which may be putting on a jumper before you reach for the heater controls."

He recently planned a building, for a property group, that bolts together like Lego and can be disassembled and then reassembled at another site. In his spare time, Lewis tries to leave the lightest possible imprint on the world by avoiding car travel where possible and getting about by bicycle. "I'm not a hard-core greenie. I am more modest, even timid, in my environmental approach than a lot of my friends. I am not an activist but I am definitely a practitioner," he says.

"I worry about the environment, but I'm an optimist. That doesn't mean I don't get angry but I don't lie awake and get anxious. Not any more."



From left to right: Russel Koskela, Lawson Armstrong, Sasha Titchkosky, Rod Windrim, Natasha Webb, Maud N Lil, Epton and Eoghan Lewis

## SASHA TITCHKOSKY Furniture designer

With a baby on the way, furniture designers Sasha Titchkosky, 35, and partner Russel Koskela, 32, began to wonder what environmental legacy they would leave for their child.

"It's disconcerting how much waste is involved in office fit-outs," says Titchkosky. "When furniture is seen as past its use-by date, which may only be a couple of years, companies get rid of it and perfectly good furniture becomes landfill. We felt we had a responsibility to do as much as we could not to contribute to that landfill."

Partners in funky Sydney furniture design firm Koskela, the pair see it as an obligation to reduce the environmental impact of their work. To this end their timber products are made from certified plantation-grown timber. They have also initiated a take-back scheme with their clients, so when companies are finished with furniture they return it to Koskela, where it is stripped of useable components and then disposed of responsibly.

"Our baby is due in October. That made us focus more and more on the environment," says Titchkosky. "At home we recycle, have a worm farm and use low-energy bulbs. We do little things, like not leaving the TV on standby - but we do drive to work as we need the car to see clients."

Perhaps the hardest part of turning green in the workplace has been remaining competitive against companies whose only concern is their bottom line. "It is very hard, especially when you are competing against people who don't care that their products are made of and can offer them at a lower price than you," she says.

But, she believes, more and more companies

are becoming aware of the impact chemicals used in furniture and buildings can have on the well-being of their staff. As an example, she points to formaldehyde (a suspected carcinogen, which can cause respiratory problems and skin irritations), which is commonly used in furniture production.

"I feel better producing the products we do. It's too easy to cop out because people automatically assume the cost will be more if something is environmentally sustainable," says Titchkosky. "Some products might cost a bit more but when we explain to clients why, they are often willing to spend a little more."

"We find that more and more employers are realising their responsibility to their workforce and realising that it also costs them a lot in downtime if they have people sick because of a toxic work environment."

## NATASHA WEBB

### Greenpeace campaign assistant

Natasha Webb, 27, has some interesting debates when people discover she works for the global environmental group Greenpeace. "There is definitely a polarised reaction. Some people are automatically affirmative, and then others are really against the way they think Greenpeace conducts its activities," she says.

Webb likes to work on changing opinions. "I tell people all the other things Greenpeace does, how we work with industries, lobby government and run community campaigns. There's a lot more to Greenpeace than activism. I think people have a stereotypical image of greenies."

Webb began with Greenpeace four years ago after completing a degree in social ecology. "The work is pretty diverse and interesting and I get to do the sorts of things you might not get the chance to do in another organisation."

Far from being pessimistic about the state of the environment Webb draws strength from the work she does at Greenpeace and the passion of others around her. "I've been involved in the environment for seven years and that sense of panic doesn't come up as frequently as it used to," she says, laughing. "I am passionate and it drives me to do what I do. I believe in what I do. "The environment is important to me on a day-to-day basis and, to a degree, it shapes the person I am, but there are plenty of other things in life to be passionate about. It's all in all of our best interests to take care of the ecosystem we live in."

Webb was raised in rural Queensland and grew up with a strong respect for the land. Now living in Bondi, Sydney, with the beach at her doorstep and the city at her back, she admits that being a greenie in a capital city can be tough. She settles for doing the best she can in her own community rather than setting out each day to save the world. "I like to think I am as green as I can be living in Bondi," she says. "I recycle. I have green power options on my electricity bill, energy-efficient home appliances and light bulbs, and environmentally friendly detergents. I don't use plastic bags and I use recycled toilet paper. I do what I can. Most of the time that's all we can do - take one step at a time. ■"

Sunday Telegraph magazine SEPTEMBER 13, 2008

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