

## Organic Essence serves sustainable body products with unusual style

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Tucked away in a rural corner of Crescent City is what appears at first glance to be a quiet farm house. But a look inside reveals it's a small-scale factory.

The interior is perfumed with herbal scents, a production site for what the owners say no one else makes – completely sustainable, organic, plastic-free body products.

Ellery and Gale West and Ralph Browning opened Organic Essence in Crescent City in 2006, a U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified organic-only business. It's designed to provide customers with natural products ... and to take a stand against the misuse of chemicals and plastics.

Before they moved to Crescent City, the owners lived in bustling Los Angeles and ran a soap company. Eventually, they said, they became uncomfortable with the claims of natural ingredients found in some of their soaps.

For example, they said, they found a lovely fragrance used for cosmetic products but when Ellery West read the material safety data sheet, it stated the fragrance should not be handled by pregnant women or women who ever planned to become pregnant.

"Our background was in soap making and body care, but the chemicals they use are creepy," said West. "Even though they're natural, they're creepy."

So, the trio moved to Crescent City to make organic body-care products using ingredients of which they could be proud. At the same time, they said, they didn't pay much attention to the packaging they were using.

Until a dead whale washed up on Crescent City's shore in 2008.

Some sources attributed the whale's death to plastics consumption. That was enough for Browning and the Wests. They decided then and there they wanted nothing to do with plastics in their business.

So they shifted their business model to a sustainable, eco-friendly company in both products and packaging. In 2009, they moved away from plastic packaging altogether.

"(The whale's death) was really heartbreaking for us," said West. "It woke us up to the challenges that plastic presents to the environment. We committed right there, on the spot, to not make plastic-packaged products."

Their current portfolio of products – lip balms, deodorants, moisturizers – all are made of natural ingredients and wrapped in compostable materials. Each product is handmade, including the packaging, in their Crescent City home factory by a small group of employees.

Gale West said plastic is certainly cheaper and more convenient to use, especially as packaging. "Plastic is really super convenient, but the end it's not accounted for. So therefore, that convenience is also stealing from the future."

At the outset, the Wests and Browning sold their products through organic grocery stores and booths at markets. Now, they sell primarily online. Gale West said some of their most-loyal customers are in countries such as China, Russia and Australia.

"We sell all over the world. We are putting Crescent City on the map in terms of sustainability," Ellery West said. "This is such a special place to have leadership in sustainability."

They refer to themselves as trailblazers, comparing their chemical- and plastic-free approach to making a trail through the forest. In the process, they have leveraged their business to a committed advocacy for a plastic-free world.

The trio - Ellery, in particular - spend considerable time researching plastic waste ... and they don't like what they've found. Not only do they believe plastic harms the environment, but that harmful chemicals from plastic packages seep into the food we eat.

The three of them now are focusing on holding producers accountable for their plastic waste. During the recent Coastal Cleanup, organized by the Smith River Alliance, they and a group of like-minded volunteers tallied the brands found on plastic waste items.

They believe the solution lies in forcing major corporations to make changes in the plastic packaging they use.