

Tips for Going Green

It can seem overwhelming if you think of environmentalism or “going green” as trying to save the whole world, but there are simple measures individuals can take on a daily basis to make homes and offices “greener” and lessen mankind’s cumulative impact on the planet.

The most basic tip is to observe “the three Rs”: reduce, reuse and recycle. Here are a few other ideas you can use to help keep the planet clean and green.

In the Home

There are many simple acts you can do that save money and positively impact the environment. Steps to practice within the home include:

- **Use a front-loading washing machine:** Front-load washing machines use less detergent and are more energy- and water-efficient.
- **Wash clothing in cold water:** Using cold water (with a detergent designed to wash in cold water) can save more energy than washing the same load in warm or hot water.
- **Close the refrigerator door:** Keeping the door open wastes a lot of energy as cold air escapes and warm, humid air gets in. Decide what is needed before opening the door, get it and close it. New kitchen designs with refrigerators that have clear glass are also helpful for the consumer to evaluate what is inside without having to open the door at all. Replace refrigerators older than 15 years; they are energy hogs. Models with top- or bottom-mounted freezers use less energy than side-by-side refrigerators, on average.
- **Change light bulbs:** Replace traditional incandescent light bulbs with energy-efficient and compact fluorescent bulbs. These bulbs use at least two-thirds less energy to provide the same amount of light. They also last up to 10 times longer. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), by replacing regular light bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs, Americans would save enough energy to light more than 2.5 million homes for a year. Also, be sure to recycle the bulbs when they do go out; each one contains mercury, which can cause serious health problems if inhaled or ingested.
- **Lower the water heater thermostat:** Setting the thermostat at 120 degrees Fahrenheit instead of 140 degrees prevents scalding and reduces energy use.
- **Fix leaky faucets:** According to the EPA, one dripping faucet can waste 250 gallons of water a month (3,000 gallons a year).
- **Stop junk mail:** On average, Americans receive enough unsolicited junk mail to equal the destruction of more than 100 million trees. Junk mail can be stopped with a call or letter to the company sending the mail.
- **Insulate your home:** The government’s Energy Star website estimates that a homeowner can save up to 20 percent on heating and cooling costs, reducing the total annual energy bill by 10 percent, by insulating and adding weather sealing to prevent energy loss.
- **Use salvaged wood:** If remodeling, consider reusing salvaged wood. It takes more fossil fuels to recycle wood (by composting) than to reuse it. It also saves virgin trees.

In the Office

Do not wait for a decree from the company president to become more eco-friendly in the workplace. These tips can assist the office with going green:

- **Use a power strip:** Electricity continues to flow to computer peripherals like printers and scanners even after a computer is turned off. Turning off the electricity at the power strip stops the energy from being wasted.
- **Turn off the lights:** Ask the manager if it is possible to put little stickers near the light switches to remind employees to turn off the lights when they leave a room. Assign a “lights out” task to the last person to leave the office at night.
- **Use recycled paper:** Paper is the No. 1 material that office workers throw away. Using recycled paper saves trees, electricity and water compared to virgin paper. Encourage employees to print on both sides of paper and to reuse sheets of one-sided used paper for notepads.
- **Optimize communications:** Program the fax machine so it does not automatically print out a confirmation sheet after every fax. Encourage communications by email, and read email messages onscreen. Do not print them out if it is not necessary.

- **Bring a coffee mug:** Institute a break room policy requiring employees to bring their own reusable coffee mug, and stop providing disposable foam cups. The company will save money on supplies and keep one-use cups out of landfills.
- **Teleconference:** Teleconferencing saves time and helps reduce emissions, according to the Energy Information Administration. Driving to just one meeting a month that is a 400-mile round trip contributes 1.38 tons of carbon to the atmosphere.
- **Put the computer to sleep:** Set office computers to go into “standby” or “hibernation” mode, and turn computers off during lunch hours, long meetings and at the end of the work day. These steps save electricity otherwise used on idle computers.
- **Garden on the roof:** If possible, install a garden on the roof of the office building. A green roof insulates a building from heat loss in the winter and heat increase in the summer. It also helps absorb pollution in urban areas. Rooftop gardens can also reduce rainwater run-off, which helps prevent flooding.

Transportation

Choosing alternative transportation just one day a week for one full year can save the average commuter in driving costs. Here are other helpful transportation tips:

- **Maintain your car:** If driving is necessary, properly maintain it to be fuel-efficient. A clogged air filter can significantly reduce the car’s gas mileage. Keeping tires inflated to the correct pressure also improves gas mileage. To save gas from being evaporated when filling, purchase gas in early morning or late evening when the air is cooler and gas is most dense.
- **Carpool:** Automobiles account for a great deal of carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons released into the atmosphere. Share a ride with a co-worker, and cut emissions almost in half.
- **Go in mass:** Using mass transit not only saves the consumer in gasoline costs, but is beneficial for air quality. Fully occupied buses and trains produce fewer nitrogen oxides per commuter than automobiles.
- **Turn it off:** When sitting in a parking lot, turn the car engine off. Idling 10 minutes less per day can keep 550 pounds of carbon dioxide out of the air every year.
- **Bike to work:** Bicycling to work saves energy and reduces pollution. It also saves consumers money. Even commutes that are five miles or less can save hundreds of gallons of gas per year.

Kids

Children grow out of clothing and age out of toys and books so quickly that many items are still in good shape, even though they are not being used. Here are some eco-friendly tips in regard to children:

- **Use cloth diapers:** Parents who use a laundry diaper service can save money and keep approximately 3.4 million tons of used disposable diapers out of landfills each year. (Petroleum-based disposable diapers take between 200 and 500 years to decompose.)
- **Eco-friendly toys:** Kids put most of their toys in their mouths at some point or another. Shop for toys that are free of toxins, such as lead (in paint). And choose toys that are not highly packaged. Plastic packaging makes up approximately 7 percent of the average household refuse. Approximately 13 million toys end up in landfill sites per year. Many of those toys are made of plastic, which takes hundreds of years to decompose. When a child grows out of a game or toy, donate the items to a worthy cause instead of throwing them into the trash. Some organizations will even take toys that are missing pieces and combine them with other similar toys to make it complete.
- **Get rechargeable batteries:** Purchase toys that do not require batteries, or choose rechargeable batteries to save money and battery waste.

When Eating

It is possible for consumers to be eco-friendly when eating. Here are some simple steps to implement:

- **Bottle your own water:** Millions of plastic water bottles end up in landfills every week. Purchase a durable and inexpensive water bottle that can be used repeatedly instead of purchasing bottled water.
- **Avoid fast-food:** Most fast-food is overpackaged with plastic and paper wrappings, bags, and other items. Avoiding fast-food whenever possible helps reduce millions of pounds of waste.

- **Banish paper:** Instead of using paper plates and disposable tableware, use cloth napkins, ceramic dishes and glassware.
- **Eat organic:** Organic products contain fewer chemicals than other produce. Chemicals used on farms to fertilize and control pests wash into rivers and streams and pollute water. In addition, many of the chemicals are made from petroleum and other nonrenewable resources.
- **Grow a garden:** In addition to providing individuals with home-grown produce, gardening helps reduce soil erosion and may help to reduce some kinds of air pollution, especially in urban areas.

When Shopping

According to the American Forest and Paper Association, Americans use 100 billion paper shopping bags each year. In an effort to be more eco-friendly, many shoppers use canvas, reusable shopping bags. Here are more tips:

- **Bigger is better:** Buy products that use few packaging materials. Half of what consumers throw away from a product is packaging. A family of four can save money by choosing large sizes instead of individual serving sizes, because small sizes use more packaging for each ounce of product than larger sizes.
- **Reuse or recycle:** Purchase products in containers that can be reused or recycled. Recyclable containers are made of glass, paper, aluminum, steel, #1 PET plastic (polyethylene terephthalate plastics hold carbonated drinks and oven-ready meal trays) and #2 HDPE plastic (high-density polyethylene plastics are most milk containers and liquid soap containers). Other plastics have a very low rate of recyclability. Almost all plastic containers have a code on the bottom or side of the product indicating the type of plastic and its recyclability.
- **Read labels:** Read the ingredients in a product to stay informed about ingredients. Some companies also state whether testing of their products is humane and/or environmentally friendly on their packaging.
- **Adhere to expirations:** Check labels for “use by,” “best if used by” or “expiration” dates. This will reduce the amount of spoiled food you have to discard when the item is no longer good.

When Cleaning

Exposure to the toxic ingredients in many cleaning products adds up over time. They can damage human health and the environment. Many companies now offer dye- and perfume-free nontoxic and biodegradable cleaning products. Here are other helpful tips:

- **Avoid aerosols:** In addition to some of the ingredients contributing to air pollution, aerosol cans cannot be recycled. Consider purchasing cleaning items in spray bottles, liquids or powders.
- **Make it at home:** Instead of purchasing cleaning products with harsh chemicals, consider cleaning with items such as baking soda, vinegar, salt and lemon juice. There are “recipes” on the internet and in books for creating cleaning products using these items.
- **Use an alternative:** Opt for a rag or sponge over a paper towel. Once a paper towel has been used, it cannot be recycled. Americans throw away 3,000 tons of paper towels per day. One sponge can last as long as 17 rolls of paper towels; cotton rags or towels last longer. Whenever possible, choose paper products that are recycled and unbleached. Many paper towel manufacturers bleach the paper fibers to increase the brightness of the product. However, it also results in the release of chlorinated compounds – especially dioxins, a confirmed carcinogen.

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