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### 50 simple tips from a year of living the green life

By Karen Klages

Tribune staff reporter

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Photovoltaics on the roof. Geothermal heating under-ground. Spiffy dual-flush toilets all about.

This wasn't the nature of our eco-mania.

Over the last 12 months, the Home&Garden section embarked on a project we called "Living the Green Life." This series of stories was meant for real people (with kids, budgets and mortgages) who want to do better by the environment. For the most part, we focused on lifestyle changes -- minor adjustments in daily behavior that may seem inconsequential when one ponders the big picture of global warming. But taken in aggregate, as a nation (when all of us do even one thing), these little lifestyle changes have a huge impact.



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We considered ways for reducing household waste. We looked at less toxic housecleaning products, and green gardening techniques and pet products. We answered readers' questions and printed tips from the hundreds who wrote to us throughout the year. In the end, we amassed a huge bank of information on what we can do to make a difference.

We're marking the one-year anniversary of the series' launch with a compilation of 50 of the best ideas we've printed -- tips from engineers, chemists, environmentalists, recycling experts, government agencies, medical professionals, appliance-makers, Master Gardeners and, of course, our trusty readers.

#### The dishwasher

Use it. Contrary to popular eco-belief, it's greener than hand-washing -- if you run it with full loads and scrape rather than rinse. The average dishwasher in American homes today uses 8.7 gallons of water a load. Washing by hand for 10 minutes with water running can use 20 gallons. If you fill the sink, you still use about 5 gallons for washing, 5 for rinsing.

#### Drying laundry

Do not over-dry laundry. An electric dryer operating an extra 15 minutes a load can cost you up to \$34 a year in wasted energy; a gas dryer, \$21 a year. If your dryer has a moisture sensor that turns the machine off automatically when clothes are dry, use it.

## **Laundry**

Wash only full loads of laundry and save (the average American home) as much as 3,400 gallons of water a year.

## **Water-saving planting**

Plan for wise watering. Group thirsty plants in one bed close to the house. Fill farther beds with drought-tolerant perennials that need little or no watering. For lawns, choose fescues, which tolerate dry spells better than bluegrass. Mulch around trees and plants to keep water from evaporating.

## **The garbage disposal**

Use it. It's greener to feed the disposal than it is to encapsulate food waste in a plastic garbage bag and send it to the landfill. Sent down the disposal and into the sewer line, organic waste gets treated by the sanitary district and turned into fertilizer.

## **Home electronics**

Power them off. A home office with a computer, printer, fax machine, computer speakers, scanner and cordless phone could consume as much power as two 75-watt light bulbs left on 24/7. And that could cost you \$100 a year in electricity. Plug equipment into a surge protector-power strip. Power off all equipment and then turn off the power strip at the end of the day. If you have a high-speed cable connection to the Internet (i.e., Comcast), plug that modem into a separate outlet and keep that "on" all the time, as Comcast updates during the night. If you have AT&T DSL (high-speed Internet), it's OK to power off that modem. In fact, AT&T's technical folks recommend it, to preserve the modem's life.

## **Thermostats**

Get a programmable thermostat and save as much as \$150 a year. Set it way up (in the summer) or way down (in winter) when everyone's at work or at school and when they're asleep. And program it to turn up the heat (in winter) or air conditioning (in summer ) shortly before folks get home or shortly before they wake up.

## **Doggie waste**

Switch to eco doggie bags that biodegrade in the landfill -- which means Fido's poop won't be forever preserved in the landfill, in the plastic bag you grabbed without considering its end-of-life issues. Among them: Chicago- (and corn-based) Poop Bags (poopbags.com) and biodegradable Pooch Pick-Up Bags from PetSmart stores.

## **Leaky toilet**

Fix it now. A leaky toilet can waste 200 gallons of water a day. Check for leaks by adding food coloring to the tank. If you have a leak, color will appear in the bowl within 15 minutes. Flush as soon as you're done with this test to avoid staining the bowl. A footnote: It is estimated that 2 out of every 10 toilets in the U.S. leak. Those two leakers can waste as much as 146,000 gallons of water a year. That's enough water for a family of four to wash clothes in their washing machine for eight years.

## **Newspapers**

A year's worth of papers from a big-city daily weighs nearly a half-ton. Every ton of paper that gets recycled saves the equivalent of 17 trees, saves enough energy to power an average home for six months, saves 7,000 gallons of water and keeps 60 pounds of pollutants out of the air.

## **Light bulbs**

Switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs. If you replace five of your most-used incandescent bulbs with CFLs, you can save \$25 to \$65 a year in energy costs. CFLs use two-thirds less energy than incandescent bulbs, generate 70 percent less heat and last up to 10 times longer. They do contain a small amount of mercury -- but the benefits of using CFLs outweigh the mercury issue. (See story inside for tips on CFL recycling.)

## **Hand soap**

Rediscover good ol' bar soap. And eliminate the plastic bottle waste that comes with using liquid soaps.

## **The microwave**

Yes, use it instead of the oven/stove to reheat food or cook small portions. You will reduce cooking energy by as much as 80 percent.

## **Cooking on the stove**

Match pots to the appropriate size burner. A 6-inch pot on an 8-inch burner wastes more than 40 percent of the burner's heat. Using the right-size pot can save you as much as \$36 a year with an electric range, as much as \$18 with a gas range.

## **Water for laundry**

Forgo the hot water when doing laundry. Heating water to "hot" accounts for 90 percent of the machine's washing energy; only 10 percent goes to power the motor. Switching to "cold" can save the average household more than \$400 annually with an electric water heater and \$300 annually with a gas heater.

## **More on water for laundry**

And get over the idea that you need hot water to kill nasties. Cold-water laundering is perfectly healthful in most situations at home, with a couple of caveats. One: If you suffer from allergies, you might need a shot of heat, which you can get from tossing the laundry into a hot dryer for 10 minutes. Here's how it goes: If

your problem is pollen or mold spores, cold water (and detergent) can rinse those out of your laundry as well as hot water. You need no heat on the situation. If your problem is animal dander or dust mites, you need some heat. Putting your laundry in a hot dryer (120 to 130 degrees) will kill those allergens. You don't need to precede that with a hot water wash. It's overkill.

The other big caveat: infectious diseases. If your family is dealing with something like E. Coli or norovirus (the cruise ship virus) or food poisoning or excessive diarrhea, all of which result in high levels of bacteria or virus in the environment, you need bleach. The hot water setting on most home washing machines is not hot enough to kill these. Add bleach with a cool or warm water setting and then follow with a hot dryer.

### **More on drying laundry**

Clean the lint trap before every load. It's the safe thing to do and the efficient thing to do. A clean trap can save as much as \$35 a year in energy costs.

### **Get organized**

Do your own (linen, storage) closet systems with a bunch of inexpensive clear plastic boxes/bins. Stash all sorts of household essentials in their own box -- for instance, tape, ribbon, razors, soap, shampoo, etc. That way you can see what you already have at home and won't be tempted to overbuy.

### **Multiple-use products**

Pay attention to all the single-use items in your daily life -- the throwaway plastic water bottles, paper napkins, paper towels, disposable wipes. And try to figure out alternatives: reusable water bottles; cloth napkins; microfiber dusting cloths that can be washed and reused; etc.

### **CFL disposal**

Get rid of CFLs -- recycle them -- responsibly. The mercury contained in compact fluorescent light bulbs should not be accumulating in a landfill or, even worse, incinerated.

\* Check with your municipality to see if it has scheduled a household hazardous waste collection date with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. And/or in the coming months, get the schedule of those collections by visiting <http://www.epa.state.il.us/land/hazardous-waste/household-haz-waste/hhwc-schedule.html>.

\* Visit <http://www.epa.gov/bulbrecycling> for ongoing waste collection sites.

\* Know that IKEA offers free CFL recycling at its stores: 1800 E. McConnor Pkwy., Schaumburg, 847-969-9700; and 750 E. Boughton Rd., Bolingbrook, 630-972-7900.

\* Check out earth911.org for more on bulb recycling.

### **Cleaning tiles**

Keep shower tiles sparkling clean without using chemicals. After a shower, use a microfiber cloth or

chamois to wipe down tiles and fixtures or for glass, use a squeegee.

### **Brushing teeth**

Turn off the tap when brushing your teeth and save as much as 10 gallons a day, a person. For a family of four, that's 14,600 gallons of water a year.

### **Recycling etiquette**

- \* Rinse out cans and bottles before throwing them into a recycling bin to discourage vermin and keep food waste off paper.
- \* Remove caps from bottles, since they are made of different materials. But don't bother trying to remove the plastic or metal rings that are often left from caps on glass bottles.
- \* It's best to keep paper recyclables dry until collection day. But a night in the rain isn't fatal.
- \* Don't risk cutting yourself by trying to remove the metal tops from cardboard tubes (in products such as scouring powder and ready-to-bake cinnamon rolls). Separation is ideal, but most recycling programs will process the item anyway, either as metal or mixed paper.

### **Soda cans**

They're small, but not insignificant. Recycling one aluminum can saves enough energy to run a television or operate a computer for three hours.

### **Plastic newspaper sleeves**

Reuse the sleeves that your newspaper comes wrapped in. Wrap paintbrushes in them if you're midway through a project but have to stop for the day. The plastic sleeve will keep the brush soft for up to a day and saves water normally used for rinsing brushes. You can also use them to slide shoes into when packing.

### **Printer cartridges / recycle**

Office Depot, OfficeMax and Staples take back ink and toner cartridges -- and hand you a \$3 store coupon for your effort.

### **Printer cartridges / refill**

Walgreens and OfficeMax offer in-store refilling stations in some of their stores. Bring in your empty printer cartridge and a store clerk will refill it on the spot (or in a matter of 10 minutes or so) and at a price that beats buying a new one. Walgreens charges \$10 for black cartridge refills, \$15 for color. Check the Web site ([walgreens.com](http://walgreens.com)) for the list of refillable cartridges and for the list of participating stores. OfficeMax charges \$12.49 to \$26.99; call stores to inquire about participation; visit [officemax.com](http://officemax.com) for store locations or call 800-283-7674.

### **Batteries**

Walgreens stores in Chicago take back household batteries for recycling. So does any Chicago Public Library. All Office Depot stores take back cell phone and household batteries. All Staples and OfficeMax stores in the Chicago area take back rechargeable household batteries. Or visit [earth911.org](http://earth911.org) for a battery recycling site near you.

### **Discrete recycle stations**

Don't be quick to say "I don't have room to recycle all that." Or: "I hate the look of recycling bins in my kitchen." Try scattering (pretty) wicker or rattan baskets in bare corners of your apartment or condo or in any home where space is at a premium. They will add warmth to your place and be your catchall for recyclables such as batteries, printer cartridges, magazines you plan to pass along to friends and family.

### **E-waste**

E-liminate it. Recycle your electronic waste -- computer monitors, desktops, laptops, fax machines, printers, scanners, peripherals, keyboards, telephones, digital cameras, VCR players, DVD players, televisions, etc. -- , which could be chock full of lead, mercury, plastics, etc.

\* Visit [illinoisrecycles.org](http://illinoisrecycles.org) and click on "E-cycling" for a list of collection sites (some take items without charge; others charge a small fee).

\* Visit [earth911.org](http://earth911.org) for more of the same

\* Office Depot offers a Tech Recycling program. The store will recycle as much e-waste as shoppers can fit into one of Office Depot's small (\$5), medium (\$10) or large (\$15) Tech Recycling boxes. The only charge is for the box. Visit [officedepot.com/techrecycling](http://officedepot.com/techrecycling) for the list of acceptable items.

\* Staples stores in Chicagoland also invite consumers to bring in a wide variety of e-waste (but not TVs) for recycling. There is a \$10 fee per piece of large equipment; no charge for small computer peripherals such as mice and keyboards. Some of the items will be refurbished by Staples' partner, Collective Good, and sold with a portion of the proceeds going to charity. For more information, visit [staples.com/ecoeasy](http://staples.com/ecoeasy).

\* And finally, OfficeMax has extended its pilot program for electronics recycling. Through February, customers can bring obsolete computer equipment to any Chicagoland OfficeMax store (downtown Express stores excluded). Cost to recycle: \$5 to \$20 a piece. For their effort, customers get an in-store coupon (\$5 to \$30) to use on selected items.

### **Plastic bags**

Bring your own (string, canvas, any kind of reusable) bags to grocery stores and say "no" to the store's plastic bags. Americans toss some 100 billion of those low-quality polyethylene plastic bags annually and the recycling rate for them is just 0.6 percent. Each high-quality reusable bag has the potential of eliminating hundreds or even thousands of plastic bags over its lifetime.

### **Pesticides**

Avoid using them in your garden and yard. Build up healthy soil instead to help prevent disease. Use barriers such as netting or cutworm collars. Wash aphids away with spray from the hose. Encourage beneficial insects that eat harmful ones. And learn to tolerate a few weeds, spots or insects if it's only an aesthetic problem.

### **Fertilizers**

Don't over-fertilize. Plants only can absorb so much; the rest washes away to pollute waterways. Follow directions or err on the side of less. Look for organic fertilizers that release nutrients slowly.

### **Native plants**

Use them in your garden. They know how to fend for themselves; they're adapted to the local climate, soils and pests. That means less watering and fewer chemicals.

### **Watering the garden**

Don't sprinkle more than necessary or in the heat of the day when much water evaporates. Put drip irrigation and soaker hoses on timers to water at night or in the early morning. Water lawns long and deep once a week, not lightly and frequently.

### **Save the rain**

Put a rain barrel under a downspout to collect free water for the garden. And/or make yourself a rain garden by making a bed designed to collect rainwater so it can be absorbed by deep-rooted natives and perennials.

### **Compost**

It is the basic ingredient of good soil. Start with a simple heap of plant material or buy a bin to keep out animals.

### **Garden plastics**

Keep them at bay. Take cardboard boxes to the nursery and leave plastic nursery flats behind. Look for plants grown in biodegradable containers. And start seeds in yogurt cups or other recyclable containers (poke a hole for drainage and wash in a 10 percent bleach solution). Or make your own pots out of yesterday's newspaper (see [chicagotribune.com/pots](http://chicagotribune.com/pots)).

### **The organic seal of approval**

The term "organic" should mean produced without chemical fertilizers, fungicides or herbicides -- but it's best to ask. If you see the OMRI (Organic Materials Research Institute) seal, it means the product has met a strict standard.

### **The organic price tag**

Expect to dole out some green, for the green. Organically grown plants generally cost more. So do organic

fertilizers. But they're worth it.

## **Garden power**

Consider electric yard equipment -- and your own muscles. Electric mowers, string trimmers, leaf blowers and hedge trimmers create less pollution and are more energy-efficient than gas ones. Even better: manual equipment.

## **Trees**

Plant them. They're like giant air filters. One mature tree takes care of the pollution caused by 13 cars.

## **Screen-savers**

Get rid of them. It takes more energy to run those floating toasters or even a static image than it does to have your computer and monitor go into a low-power mode. Unlike 10 years ago, the screen-saver does not extend the life of your monitor. Killing it could save \$50 to \$100 a year on your electric bill over a year's time.

## **Old clothing**

Reinvent clothes. Turn children's jeans with worn-out knees into shorts. Reinvent clothes that you still like and still fit, but have minor "style" problems -- for example, hemlines that need to be shortened significantly. Many dry cleaners employ seamstresses for those who can't (or can't find the time) to do it themselves.

## **Old clothing -- Part 2**

Be conscious of how you dispose of well-worn clothes. They're not likely to end up on the shelves of your local thrift store. (In 2005, an estimated 11.1 million tons of textiles were generated as municipal solid waste, only 15.3 percent of which was recovered for export or reprocessing.) The Salvation Army, AMVETS and Unique Thrift Stores are three organizations that work hard to divert all types of unsold fabric from landfills. (Many charities sell unsold clothes to textile recycling companies, which in turn sell wearable items to wholesalers overseas, where demand is high. The really worn stuff could be turned into cleaning cloths or filler inside your mattress or car's interior roof.)

The non-profit Gaia-Movement, USA (773-651-7870, [gaia-movement-usa.org](http://gaia-movement-usa.org)) and U'SAgainLLC, a commercial textile recycling company (800-604-9533, [usagain2.com](http://usagain2.com)), have drop boxes in and around Chicago. Call them for locations. Both of these organizations also ensure that worn clothes find a second home overseas or a second life through reprocessing.

## **Driving**

Three simple ways to improve your mileage:

1. Don't drive aggressively. Speeding, rapid acceleration and hard braking can lower your highway gas mileage by as much as 33 percent and city mileage by as much as 5 percent.

2. Don't go super-fast. Driving 75 m.p.h. instead of 65 m.p.h. can cut fuel economy by as much as 15 percent.

3. Keep up with your car's maintenance. Clean air filters can improve gas mileage by as much as 10 percent. Properly inflated and aligned tires improve mileage by about 3 percent.

## **Reuse**

Check out freecycle.org. It's a kind of eBay experience -- but without the financial gain. The city-specific site allows people to post items they want to get rid of and others who live close by, in turn, to "shop" for something they need. No money is exchanged between parties.

## **Study**

Check out these Web sites:

- \* illinoisrecycles.org
- \* earth911.org
- \* ecomall.com
- \* footprintnetwork.org (to measure your ecological footprint)
- \* recycle.net
- \* cityofchicago.org/environment
- \* energystar.gov
- \* <http://www.doe.gov>
- \* epa.gov

## **Thermostats -- Part 2**

Use your programmable thermostat -- even if you have a leaky old home and are worried that your furnace is working too hard to bring the house back up to your comfort zone two times a day. Without getting into the issue of proper insulation, it saves more energy to let the house cool down when you're not home during the day and while you sleep at night than to keep it at the comfort zone continuously. But, if you're setting it back to, say, 60 degrees, that may be too far for a Chicago winter, especially if your home isn't well-insulated. At 60 degrees, countertops and dishes will seem cold. Try setting the thermostat back to 63 to 65 degrees in the winter. That way the recovery is not so steep, but you still get some benefit from the set back.

## **Kitty litter**

Consider alternative litter. There are more earthy-friendly, organic options than the standard clay litters, which pile up in landfills. Among them: Feline Pine (made of pine), Sweat Scoop (wheat) and World's Best Cat Litter (corn). When it's time to change the litter, you can let organic litters biodegrade naturally by dumping them in your yard -- far, far away from where kids may roam and from the veggie garden and compost. If you would rather not engage your yard, you still can go green with a biodegradable liner for the cat pan. (Biobags makes one; order at dirtworks.net).

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