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50 easy ways to go green

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Abstract (Document Summary)

The wallet-size list sorts out the fruits and veggies that tend to be higher in pesticides (like apples and spinach) from produce with a lower count (like bananas and peas). If you buy locally, you won't have to rely on farms that ship food nationwide, which helps to decrease our dependence on oil and to cut back on gas emissions. The chain is replacing petroleum-based plastic containers with corn-based packaging for pre-cut fruit, herbs, strawberries, and Brussels sprouts. Most paint emits VOCs (volatile organic compounds), the same kind of chemicals found in gasoline and nail polish. Look for the Energy Star label, awarded to fridges, washers, and other products that exceed government efficiency standards by using less water or electricity.

Full Text (1605 words)

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[Headnote]

You can be good to the earth-without giving up things you love. Plus, what those "eco" labels really mean. By Leslie Billera

at the supermarket

Be picky about produce

Download the "Shoppers' Guide to Pesticides in Produce" at ewg.org. The wallet-size list sorts out the fruits and veggies that tend to be higher in pesticides (like apples and spinach) from produce with a lower count (like bananas and peas).

Choose "certified" coffee

Yuban coffee, right, is Rainforest Alliance Certified (that means it's grown in a way that preserves the ecosystem). A Fair Trade Certified brand is Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. (Both brands are available at many markets.) For more on these certification labels, see the chart on page 86.

Support local farms

At eatwellguide.org, you can plug in your zip code and find suppliers of organic and sustainably produced meat, poultry, eggs, and more. If you buy locally, you won't have to rely on farms that ship food nationwide, which helps to decrease our dependence on oil and to cut back on gas emissions.

Tote your own grocery bag

Paper or plastic? Neither! If you're shopping for a small load, bring along a cute sack like the polka-dot tote, above, from Cath Kidston (cathkidston.com). Another practical option: the ACME Workhorse Style 1500 (reusablebags.com), which crunches into a tiny pouch that fits in your purse.

Pay attention to packaging

Every American produces about four and a half pounds of garbage a day. So before you buy something, eyeball the amount of cardboard, plastic, and/or other materials used for the box or wrapping. Wal-Mart is one big retailer that is waking up to the problem: The chain is replacing petroleum-based plastic containers with corn-based packaging for precut fruit, herbs, strawberries, and Brussels sprouts.

around the house

Save money in the bathroom

Buy water-efficient showerheads. With low-flow models, a family of four can cut water usage by as much as 280 gallons a month-and yet not feel much difference in water pressure. Two we like: Kohler's Master Shower Eco (kohler.com) and Niagara Conservation's Earth Massage (niagaraconservation.com).

Bring home superhero plants

Certain greens can help remove indoor air pollutants like formaldehyde and benzene. Don't have the gardening gene? Golden pothos, English ivy, and peace lilies are all easy-to-grow toxin fighters.

Recycle rechargeables

Cell phones, digital cameras, and camcorders have made these batteries more popular than ever, but in certain states-Florida, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Vermont-it's illegal to throw them away. Wherever you live, you can find a nearby store that will recycle them for you; just go to rbrc.org and type in your zip code.

Adjust fridge and freezer temps

Refrigerators eat up the most electricity in the household. Maximize efficiency by keeping the fridge at 37°F. and the freezer at 0°F.

Lighten up with energy savings

Consider using compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs). They cost a bit more than regular bulbs, but you'll lower your electric bill and pay less in the long run-CFLs last up to ten times longer than traditional ones. (Worried that fluorescents will fill your house with a greenish glow? That's no longer a problem. When we compared a regular bulb with a GE Energy Star Qualified CFL, testers couldn't tell the difference.) You can buy CFLs at most hardware and home stores. To save more on lighting, install dimmer switches and use timers, indoors and out.

Recycle smart

From furniture to electronics, one person's trash is another's treasure-so when you want to dispose of an old item, don't make the dump your first stop. Two sites with alternatives: freecycle.org and earth911.org. The Freecycle Network describes itself as "a place to give or receive what you have and don't need or what you need and don't have-[to keep] stuff out of landfills." The Earth 911 Web site offers community-specific resources, with a focus on recycling. Check out the home page to find out where you can recycle your computer, your cell phone-even used motor oil.

entertaining

Protect the earth while you picnic

At your next outdoor party, ask people to write their names on disposable cups so they'll use only one (to make it easy, put out markers). If you use disposable dinnerware, buy the kind that won't clog landfills or kill trees. To try: EarthShell plates and bowls (www.earthshell.com). They're made from corn, potatoes, and limestone-and cost less than 6 cents per plate.

remodeling

Take paint precautions

Most paint emits VOCs (volatile organic compounds), the same kind of chemicals found in gasoline and nail polish. But manufacturers like Sherwin-Williams have developed water-based products that perform well but give off virtually no VOCs. Kylon's H2O paint is the first low-VOC latex spray paint that can be cleaned up with soap and water. Made from 99 percent food-grade ingredients, Anna Sova's Healthy Wall Finish (annasova.com) leaves your rooms smelling vaguely like vanilla. To be at least minimally organic, use a water-based latex paint, not an oil-based alkyd paint-and remember, exterior paints should never be used indoors.

Raise the roof with recycled materials

If your old shingles need replacing, consider a Classic Metal Roofing System (classicroof.com). It's made from recycled aluminum cans but resembles traditional shakes or tiles. Thanks to the Energy Policy Act of 2005, installing this type of material can qualify you for a \$500 tax credit.

Choose energy-efficient appliances

Look for the Energy Star label, awarded to fridges, washers, and other products that exceed government efficiency standards by using less water or electricity. For Energy Star appliances that have been tested by GHI, visit goodhousekeeping.com.

personal style

Dress in eco-chic clothing

Lara Miller's Melissa tunic, right, is 100 percent bamboo, yet it's as soft as silk. (For stores, go to laramiller.net.) Linda Loudermilk, an eco-couture designer, uses fabric made from sasawashi (a Japanese leaf), along with bamboo, soya, and other exotic self-sustaining plants (lindaloudermilk.com).

Opt for new undies

Wearing 100 percent organic-cotton panties reduces your exposure to chemical pesticides in a sensitive area. Try Blue Canoe brand (goodhumans.com).

Make up with Mother Nature

Aveda's All-Sensitive Body Formula moisturizing body oil uses organic jojoba. What's more, most of Aveda's packaging is made from recycled material. A makeup line that's entirely organic: Nvey Eco (econveybeauty.com). We particularly like their eyeshadows.

Get sporty, eco-style

Patagonia's PCR fleece vest (\$70) is made from recycled soda bottles.

Be clean (and green)

Pangea Organics soaps, which are made with organic and often Fair Trade Certified ingredients, are scented with oils like lavender and lemongrass. They come in a biodegradable carton that will start disintegrating within 48 hours if you plant it in your garden. Available at Whole Foods Markets.

cooking & eating

Become a flexitarian

Swap out one meat dish a week for a veggie plate. Why? Because raising produce is "cheaper," in terms of energy, than raising animals. Log on to vcgwcb.com to find tasty, meatless recipes (our favorite: the lentil burgers).

Grill corn in its husk

Instead of stripping off the green leaves, soak the ear whole, then place it right on the barbecueno aluminum foil required.

Go for the goldcoffee filters, that is

Spare trees by replacing paper filters in your coffeemaker with reusables (usually gold colored).

Get the organic habit

Switch to organic for at least one product that you buy every week.

Put it in park

Avoid drive-through windows, especially if there are long lines.

Compost

Instead of trashing food scraps, toss them into Gardener's Supply Company Kitchen Compost Crock, a ceramic countertop composter that's perfect for firsttimers (gardeners.com).

Break out the bamboo

This plant is a far more sustainable natural resource than wood because it grows very quickly. Try the stylish bamboo bowls and cutting boards from TimberGrass (lamsonsharp.com).

home office

Buy a laptop

It uses considerably less power than a desktop computer.

Get off junk mail lists

Register with the Direct Marketing Association's Mail Preference Service (dmaconsumers.org) and you'll see a significant reduction in mail after three months.

Double up on printing

Configure your printer so that it prints on both sides of the page. You know those extra pages you get when printing out one simple e-mail? Turn them over and put them back in the printer for reuse.

Invest the green way

Environmentally conscious mutual funds are increasingly available through 401(k) plans, especially if employees express interest. To learn more, log on to socialinvest.org; then talk to your benefits administrator.

for kids

Buy organic for baby

Hanna Andersson makes her children's clothing-including the romper at left-with 100 percent organic cotton grown without harmful chemicals (hannaandersson.com). This garment is also certified to meet the Oeko-Tex Standard 100 requirements, meaning every fabric, button, thread, and zipper is tested for over 100 potentially harmful substances. Another source for organic-cotton baby clothes is Wal-Mart's new George Baby line for sizes up to nine months.

Teach kids to be green

Give your little ones responsibility for your family's recycling and match whatever they make in deposits at the store. They'll learn about money and recycling at the same time.

in your yard

Mow-ercise!

Today's non-gasoline-powered reel lawn mowers are easier to push than the old models. Their eco-benefit: zero emissions (plus, you're getting great exercise). If you prefer a power mower, consider a quiet, battery-operated model from Black & Decker.

Warm up to solar energy

You may not be ready for a totally sun-powered home, but you can get a taste of the technology by using solar-powered lighting in your yard or on your patio. We like Malibu's Solar Floodlight (intermatic.com).

Go native

Plant flowers and shrubs that are well suited to your climate (the staff at your local nursery can help). The benefit: You'll use less fertilizer and pesticides.

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