



## *Living Green...*

# A Matter of Choice

So you have made the decision to go “green.” Good for you! Your decision will have far-reaching consequences for the near and distant future. In fact your actions can help to ensure that there is a better future for you, your children, and your grandchildren.

You no doubt are already doing some things that are a part of green living. As you learn more about living green, you’ll find more practices that can be applied to your everyday lifestyle.

### **Green Living means living in a way that causes as little harm as possible to the Earth.**

“Green living” refers to choices and activities that have a positive impact on our natural environment without reducing the quality of our lifestyle. The practice of living green minimizes or eliminates toxins from our environment and reduces harmful actions that affect our environment. Reliable information regarding green living and green products leads to better decisions and practices.

“Renewable” resources can be created again. For example, trees can be cut down, but more trees can be planted and grown.

“Sustainability” refers to using resources in a way that meets our present needs without compromising our ability to provide for needs of future generations.

“Green products” are non-toxic, energy-efficient and durable. They may be made from local materials, recycled or rapidly renewable materials. They’re often able to be recycled or reused.

### **Why Go Green?**

There are many reasons why people live green. However, let’s consider these three reasons:

**1. You can actually save money by reducing energy use.** For instance, select high-efficiency Energy Star appliances and compact fluorescent light bulbs. (Energy Star labels are shown on many appliances and home products to indicate that they meet or exceed energy standards established by the Environmental Protection Agency.)

**2. Green products help protect our environment.** Every step, no matter how small, is a step toward creating a better living environment for your family.

**3. Green building practices and products create better places to live and work.** We on average spend 90 percent of our time indoors. It makes sense to create indoor spaces that are healthful and supportive. For instance, most paints include synthetic ingredients that “off-gas” volatile organic compounds after they are applied to the walls. These VOCs may cause headaches, throat irritation, and even allergic reactions in people who are especially sensitive. Instead, select a brand with a low- or even zero-VOC rating.

### **Where to Start?**

The best place to start living a greener lifestyle is at home. Start by reviewing what you are willing to do

and what changes you are willing to make in your practices and life style. How green are you willing to go?

One key to living greener is to **reduce** what you buy, **reuse** what you have (or give it to someone who can), **repair or restore** instead of buying new, and cut down on the amount of waste you produce by **recycling** and composting. Every member of the household can contribute to this effort. Take a look at the home you have, the selection of materials and furnishings that are a part of this home, the various cleaning and household products you use, and how efficiently your home uses energy and water.

Now think about what you can do or change in your life to help apply green living practices. It may help to make a list of the overall impacts you would like to make, such as:

- Reduce amount of solid waste that is thrown out on a regular basis by your household.
- Make wiser selections of purchased products (less packaging, use of renewable resources, use of local or regional products, overall quality).
- Increase the use of recycled/reused materials whenever possible.
- Reduce amount of toxins and contaminants in your home.
- Learn skills to reuse/repair/repurpose household items.
- Reduce water use.
- Lower energy consumption (both through lower utility bills and through lower embodied energy consumption in products purchased).

The next step is to determine what you are already doing and what additional changes you can make in your home. Some areas you may want to consider include:

- Switch to biodegradable non-toxic soaps and cleaning products and purchase paper products with a high recycled content.
- Use products that can be washed and reused rather than thrown away after one or two uses.
- Recycle as many paper, plastic, cardboard, and packaging materials as possible as well as cans and bottles.
- Request that junk mail be dropped.
- Take advantage of natural light and multiple lighting options in your home.
- Use energy-efficient light bulbs and rechargeable batteries. Install light sensors that turn lights off automatically when not in use.
- Upgrade older appliances, especially refrigerators and dishwashers, for more energy efficient, low water use features.
- Make sure toilets and faucets are water efficient; repair all leaks promptly.

## **What are Green Products?**

Today's green earth-friendly home is based on environmentally responsible design and construction that provides comfort and quite likely saves money over time. While there are still no officially recognized standards and/or regulations for green products, nevertheless there are hundreds of green products available on the market and the number is growing all the time. A few examples of green products to look for include beautiful tile made from recycled glass, long-wearing engineered wood for decks and kitchen cabinets, carpeting made from recycled plastic bottles, non-fume and toxic-free cleaning products and household products, bamboo and organic cotton home textile products, and more.

Many of these products are labeled "green" if they are made from salvaged or recycled materials, provide alternatives to products with high environmental impacts, decrease energy or water use, reduce impacts of construction or production, and contribute to a safe, healthful indoor environment. Most green products have the following overall qualities. They are:

- Durable
- Less toxic

- Good quality
- Energy efficient
- Respectful of environment

## When Selecting Green Products for Your Home

Although there are an ever-growing number of green building products on the market, it may be more difficult at first to find ones that meet the suggested selection criteria. Take time to explore product options. Learn all you can about the particular materials you would like to use. Read labels, check manufacturers' information and Web sites. Ask questions of builders, retailers, architects, and educators to gather information on which to base your decisions. As you browse through stores and investigate various Internet sites, keep these questions in mind:

1. What type of long-life, durable products and materials will work for the intended location and purpose?
2. Are there recycled, reclaimed or salvaged products or materials you can use?
3. Are products made from rapidly renewable materials?
4. Are there product options that are low-fume or non-toxic?
5. Are the products made of durable materials that are manufactured with less energy?
6. What local materials or local products are available?
7. How does the cost compare with other materials that are not as green?

Traditionally, shopping decisions have been made based on quality, performance, and cost. Today a savvy shopper also considers environmental impacts that promote healthy homes. Keep in mind that products vary widely in green ratings due to their individual characteristics and you probably won't find the ideal product that meets all criteria. Therefore, consider which of the factors are most important to you and make your selection and purchase based on those points.

## Greenwashing

We hear a lot about keeping our environment clean and green, and we're asked to do our part by choosing green products when possible. However, it's sometimes confusing to know which products are truly green. In fact there's even a word for making false claims about products being environmentally friendly. It's called "greenwashing."

The Federal Trade Commission oversees truth in labeling, and they're updating the green labeling standards. Until then keep in mind that companies can use words such as green, 100 percent natural, organic, non-toxic, and biodegradable to help promote their product without anyone checking to see if these claims are valid. So what can you do to ensure that you're actually buying green products?

First of all, be aware. Check on the company and their claim to be environmentally friendly. Read the small print on the packaging and see if they explain **how** and **why** they're green. Check the company's Web site. Read information telling why they claim to be environmentally friendly. Call the customer service number for the company and ask them to explain anything that's not clear. And don't buy into big promises. For instance, if a detergent says it is "chemical free" or "non-toxic", what are they using to clean your clothes? Does it make sense? If the label says something is "biodegradable," how are they backing up their claim?

## Judging Products? Look at the Label!

Here's some help in judging green claims on products (example: cleaning products).

**Biodegradable:** This unregulated term is meaningful only if it specifies the amount of time it takes for the product to decompose, as most substances will eventually biodegrade over time given the right conditions, such as sunlight.

- **Non-toxic:** There is no official definition or third-party verification for this claim. Not meaningful.
- **Organic:** Household cleaning products aren't regulated by the Organic Foods Production Act, but some of their ingredients, such as plant oils, can be labeled "certified organic."

The bottom line is to pay attention. Know what you're buying and don't waste your money on products that sound too good to be true.

## Simple Actions for Living Green

- **BYOB...Tote your own grocery bag or bring your own shopping cart.** Each year Americans throw away over 100 billion polyethylene plastic bags, including those from grocery stores, trash bags, and even those convenient-to-use sandwich bags. Unfortunately, plastics are made from petroleum and the processing and burning in manufacturing is considered one of the big contributors to environmental pollution. In addition, less than one percent of these plastic bags are recycled. Instead they end up in landfills and move on into our environment harming land, water, birds and animals. If we use cloth bags instead, we can each save at least six plastic bags a week. That's 24 bags a month, and that adds up to at least 288 bags a year per person! So get in the BYOB habit. Take your own reusable cloth bags with you when you go to the store.
- **Pay attention to packaging as you shop.** Every American produces about four and a half pounds of garbage a day. So before you buy something, notice the amount of cardboard, plastic, and/or other materials used for the box or wrapping. Some retailers have made the switch to biodegradable bags and containers for foods such as fruits and vegetables. Some packaging helps to protect the product and makes it easier to ship from the producer or manufacturer to the retailer. However, there are many examples of excess packaging on the market. Buy the least packaging available...and make sure that as many of the packaging materials are recyclable as possible to reduce the amount of trash.
- **Choose recycled and green products for remodeling projects and furnishings in your home.** Selecting carpeting and carpet padding made of recycled materials, installing doors and fireplace mantels from homes that have been torn down, and picking furniture and building materials made from recycled and recyclable materials are all examples of greening your home.
- **Take paint precautions and check for environmentally friendly wall coverings.** Most paint emits volatile organic compounds, the same kind of chemicals found in gasoline and nail polish. However, most manufacturers have developed water-based products that perform well but give off virtually no VOCs. To be at least minimally green, use a water-based latex paint, not oil-based alkyd paint and remember that exterior paints should never be used indoors. Several wallcoverings are now manufactured from environmentally friendly or recycled materials that won't off-gas VOCs. Read labels and ask questions to know more about the products before buying.
- **Think bamboo and other rapidly renewable resources** when selecting furnishings for your home. You'll find flooring, bed linens, towels, cutting boards, and salad bowls of bamboo.

- **Choose energy-efficient appliances, electronics, and building materials.** Look for the Energy Star label and other energy usage information included with refrigerators, washers, and other products that exceed government efficiency standards by using less water or electricity.
- **Make the switch to compact fluorescent lighting.** Be sure that the type chosen is compatible for the use and location intended. Be aware of new developments and use of LED lighting as companies expand the impact of this lighting alternative. For instance, LED lights are commonly available for flashlights now and that use will expand dramatically in the near future.
- **Make use of solar energy.** You may not be ready for a totally sun-powered home or a solar water heater, but you can get a taste of the technology at lower cost by using solar-powered lighting in your yard or on your patio. Most are easy to install and available at your home improvement and hardware stores.
- **Repair or restore household items when feasible.** Develop do-it-yourself skills to perform simple home repairs and household maintenance.
- **Give items another life.** Think of ways to reuse and extend the life of items no longer needed for their original purpose. Give away items to others who need them. Swap “white elephant” items with friends and neighbors. (One person’s trash can be another person’s treasure.) Take clothing and household items to consignment shops for resale.
- **Reduce clutter and trash by stopping junk mail and excessive catalogs.** Each person receives almost 560 pieces of junk mail each year. About 44 percent of this junk mail is thrown in the trash, often unopened and unread, and ends up in a landfill. Simplify your life, reduce clutter in your home, and save paper resources by removing your name from junk mail and unsolicited catalog lists.
- **Plant a tree or plant flowers and shrubs that are well suited to your climate.** Plant some native wildflowers for added enjoyment. Your county extension agent or knowledgeable people at your local nursery can suggest what will grow well in your area.
- **Push for green yards.** Today's non-gasoline-powered reel lawn mowers are easier to push than the old models, and they have zero emissions too. You’ll also be getting some great exercise. If you prefer a power mower, consider a quiet, battery-operated model.
- **Put it in park and walk a few steps.** Avoid drive-through windows, especially if there are long lines.
- **Teach kids to make green choices and live green.** They’re enthusiastic, they “get it”, and they’ll come up with some creative ideas of their own.

Add your ideas to this list and share green living ideas with your friends.

## How Green Are YOU Willing to Be?

The overall objective of living green is to have a healthy, toxic-free home while leaving sufficient resources and a sound, safe environment for future generations.

Decisions for selecting and using green products are based on these objectives:

- Our homes can support our health and the environment.
- We, as consumers, must be knowledgeable in how to make wise decisions in purchasing, using, and disposing of green products for the home.
- It’s important that we choose to surround ourselves with buildings and products that are healthy and life-giving.

Live green for a better community and a better world. You **can** make a difference!

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