

12 Simple Steps for Going Green in 2012

Danielle Nierenberg, Posted January 5, 2012 at 9:30 a.m.



PHOTO BY [THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL FILES](#), MIKE MAPLE/[THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL FILES](#) // [BUY THIS PHOTO](#)

Alx Collins makes her way to Burke's Book Store in Cooper-Young area. When possible use your bike to run short errands or commute to work which has become easier with the addition of bike lanes and greenways.

The United Nations has designated 2012 as the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All. As we ring in the new year, here are 12 simple steps that we can all take to reduce our impact on the environment and make our lives a little greener.

1. Recycle

In 2009, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to require all homes and businesses to use recycling and composting collection programs. As a result, more than 75 percent of all material collected is being recycled, diverting 1.6 million tons from the landfills annually -- double the weight of the Golden Gate Bridge.

What you can do: Put a separate container next to your trash can or printer, making it easier to recycle your bottles, cans and paper.

2. Turn off the lights

On the last Saturday in March (March 31, 2012) hundreds of people, businesses, and governments around the world turn off their lights for an hour as part of Earth Hour, a movement to address climate change.

What you can do: Earth Hour happens only once a year, but you can make an impact every day by turning off lights during bright daylight, or whenever you will be away for an extended period of time.

3. Make the switch

In 2007, Australia became the first country to "ban the bulb," drastically reducing domestic usage of incandescent light bulbs. By late 2010, incandescent bulbs had been totally phased out, and, according to the country's environment minister, this simple move has made a big difference, cutting an estimated 4 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions by 2012.

What you can do: A bill in Congress to eliminate incandescents in the United States failed in 2011, but you can still make the switch at home. Compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) use only 20-30 percent of the energy required by incandescents to create the same amount of light, and LEDs use only 10 percent, helping reduce electric bills and carbon emissions.

4. Turn on the tap

The bottled water industry sold 8.8 billion gallons of water in 2010, generating nearly \$11 billion in profits. Yet plastic water bottles create huge environmental problems -- they end up in landfills, litter roadsides, and pollute waterways and oceans.

What you can do: Fill up your glasses and reusable water bottles with water from the sink.

5. Turn down the heat

The U.S. Department of Energy estimates that consumers can save up to 15 percent on heating and cooling bills just by adjusting their thermostats. Turning down the heat by 10 to 15 degrees Fahrenheit for eight hours can result in savings of 5-15 percent on your home heating bill.

What you can do: Turn down your thermostat when you leave for work, or use a programmable thermostat to control your heating settings.

6. Support food recovery programs

Each year, roughly a third of all food produced for human consumption -- approximately 1.3 billion tons -- gets lost or wasted, including 34 million tons in the United States, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

What you can do: Encourage your local restaurants and grocery stores to partner with food rescue organizations. And go through your cabinets and shelves and donate any nonperishable canned and dried foods that you won't be using to your nearest food bank or shelter.

7. Buy local

"Small Business Saturday," falling between "Black Friday" and "Cyber Monday," was established in 2010 as a way to support small businesses during the busiest shopping time of the year.

What you can do: Instead of relying exclusively on large supermarkets, consider farmers markets and local farms for your produce, eggs, dairy and meat. Food from these sources is usually fresher and more flavorful, and your money will be going directly to these food producers.

8. Get out and ride

We all know that carpooling and using public transportation helps cut down on greenhouse gas emissions, as well as our gas bills, but biking is another transportation alternative.

What you can do: When possible use your bike to run short errands or commute to work. Bike lanes are making it easier and safer to use a bike for transportation and recreation.

9. Share a car

Car-sharing programs spread from Europe to the United States nearly 13 years ago and are increasingly popular, with U.S. membership jumping 117 percent between 2007 and 2009. Innovative programs such as Chicago's I-GO are even introducing solar-powered cars to their fleets, making the impact of these programs even more eco-friendly.

What you can do: Join a car-share program or carpool. Even if you don't want to get rid of your own car, carpooling can greatly reduce the challenges of finding parking, as well as your environmental impact as you run errands or commute to work.

10. Plant a garden

Whether you live in a studio loft or a suburban McMansion, growing your own vegetables is a simple way to bring fresh and nutritious food literally to your doorstep. Growing a garden doesn't have to take up a lot of space, and even a small plot can make a big impact on your diet and wallet.

What you can do: Plant some lettuce in a window box. Lettuce seeds are cheap and easy to find, and when planted in full sun, one window box can provide enough to make several salads worth throughout a season.

11. Compost

And what better way to fertilize your garden than using your own composted organic waste. You will not only reduce costs by buying less fertilizer, but you will also help to cut down on food and other organic waste.

What you can do: If you are unsure about the right ways to compost, websites such as HowToCompost.org and organizations such as the U.S. Composting Council, provide easy steps to reuse your organic waste.

12. Reduce your meat consumption

Livestock production accounts for about 18 percent of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions and accounts for about 23 percent of all global water used in agriculture.

What you can do: You don't have to become a vegetarian or vegan, but simply cutting down on the amount of meat you consume can go a long way. Consider substituting one meal day with a vegetarian option. Websites such as Meatless Monday and Eating Well offer numerous vegetarian recipes that are healthy for you and the environment. For more information, visit worldwatch.org.

-- *Danielle Nierenberg, Worldwatch Institute*