



How You Can Go Green This Year

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As the New Year continues to breathe fresh—and, I hope, healthier—life into us all, [The Worldwatch Institute](#), a global environmental research organization, has released its 12 Simple Steps for Going Green in 2012.

Beyond suggesting people recycle more, buy local foods, and partake in car-sharing programs, the guidelines also highlight the importance of planting a garden, cutting down meat consumption, and switching over from incandescent light bulbs to compact fluorescent lamps. The Worldwatch Institute has provided a comprehensive and unintimidating approach to more ecologically responsible living, but it's important to consider in greater detail why some of these steps—while key to a greener planet—are not as simple as they appear.

I've said it before, and I'll keep saying until I'm blue in the face: teaching and implementing organic farming practices in the U.S. and around the world is among the simplest, most sustainable, delicious things we can do for our well-being. Organic products nourish our bodies without also exposing us to the harmful chemicals that pervade traditional farms. While detractors (more commonly known as pesticide manufacturers) claim widespread organic farming is not a viable option because it would yield lower food production, experts at [The Rodale Institute](#), which for 55 years has been teaching farmers around the world how to grow organically, note that industrial agriculture is actually undermining the soil, water, and diverse plant life needed to sustain the world's growing human population in the long term.

The organic farming message put forward by large organizations like Rodale is undoubtedly what inspired [Matt Klebes](#), a [Peace Corps](#) volunteer from New Hampshire, to impart the gospel to youths in the [Philippines](#) through the Organic Farming Center.

Aside from refining and improving farming techniques, schools need to stress nutrition education, and I'm not talking about food pyramids. If children are taught at a young age exactly where their food comes from, why whole grains and leafy greens are healthier than processed snacks, and where to find these more wholesome items, this knowledge will stay with them their entire lives. Diabetes and obesity are epidemic in this country, but they don't have to be. There is a big difference between nutritious foods and manufactured products. Understanding this divide and imparting that wisdom to the next generation will make us all feel better in the long run.

Unfortunately, the mercury found in some common household products, like compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), has the potential to make us all feel much, much worse if those light bulbs break. Though they use 75 percent less energy, last ten times as long as traditional incandescent bulbs, and are predicted to save consumers hundreds of dollars a year in electricity costs, CFLs contain an average of four milligrams of mercury per bulb, posing health risks to us all, but especially to young children and pregnant woman.

The key for avoiding mercury exposure is proper handling of the CFLs, which are made of glass and can easily break, thus releasing a potent neurotoxin into the air. [The Environmental Working Group](#) provides on its website thorough, helpful instructions for proper clean-up should a CFL shatter: Isolate the site; immediately ventilate the room; wear proper safety gear; and follow your state's CFL disposal rules. Recycling these bulbs is the safest, most responsible option, but a substantial number of CFLs will likely end up in landfills anyway—permeating our water, soil, air, and food.

As ever, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) and others insist the amount of mercury in CFLs is too insignificant to cause real health concerns, and is small compared to the amount of mercury that won't be released into the environment because of energy savings. We've heard this racket before. Mercury can cause brain damage; headaches; cognitive decline; respiratory failure; kidney effects; tremors; and mood swings, to name just a few devastating effects. What's more, some research and anecdotal evidence suggests that CFLs produce an ultrasonic noise imperceptible to humans, but torturous for household pets like dogs and cats.

The government has touted CFLs as one of the great answers to this country's energy crisis, but they are far from a perfect alternative to inefficient incandescent bulbs. Light emitting diodes, or LED lights, are a safer, greener option, but their light output tends to be lower and their cost is substantially greater than CFLs. At present, they are simply not the most practical option for most people, but hopefully that will change with time.

Right now, there is no perfect solution to the light bulb problem, and as with so many matters of healthy living, it is up to the consumer to remain informed, and to use that power to make the best decision for themselves and their family. For 2012 and beyond, that's one simple step I think we can all take together.

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