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# Easy ways to green up your life — and save

By Kate Ashford | 14 July 2014



(Stockbyte)

Lloyd Alter and his wife, Kelly, live in a drafty, 100-year-old house in Toronto, Canada. To shrink their energy use and environmental impact, Lloyd wished to downsize, but Kelly wanted to stay put — so they compromised.

“I’m dividing the house in half and my wife and I are going to live in half of it and rent out the other half,” said Lloyd, who is the managing editor of **Treehugger.com** and an adjunct professor of sustainable design at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. “The amount of energy used per person in that house drops [substantially].”

Not everyone is ready to halve their living space and rent out the upstairs — but many people would like to be greener. Some 67% of US residents want to do more to help the environment, but they aren't sure where to start, according to a survey by Kelton Research. Unfortunately, Americans also scored the worst in terms of sustainable behaviour, according to a survey for National Geographic by Canadian consulting firm GlobeScan. India, China and Brazil scored highest out of 17 countries in “green” behaviour related to housing, transportation, food, and consumption of goods.

“The healthier we live and the more sustainable and lower impact lifestyle we have, the better off the individual society and the planet would be,” said Erik Assadourian, transforming cultures project director for the Worldwatch Institute in Washington DC.

Here are some pointers on greening up your life:

**What it will take:** You will need to be committed to doing things a little (or a lot) differently than your neighbours. It may take some research, and it may be less convenient — riding your bike to work, for instance, may take longer.

**How long you need to prepare:** You can start making changes today.

**Do it now:** *Eat differently.* In one UK study, vegetarians had roughly half the carbon footprint of meat eaters. That is, they produced less greenhouse gas emissions. But if you can't give up meat completely, reducing the quantity you consume or giving up beef can make a big difference.

“The carbon footprint of red meat is absolutely phenomenal,” Alter said. “The food cows get fed is very high energy input, and they make a lot of methane.”

Giving up meat won't help much if you're buying out-of-season produce that has to be flown in from far-off places. “Chicken has a lower carbon footprint than a hothouse tomato,” Alter said. “So much energy goes into heating the greenhouses. You have to look at what you're eating and be sensible.” Aim for

local and in-season foods as much as you can. (Plus, you'll save 10% to 15% by sticking with in-season produce.)

*Drive less.* Buying a hybrid car means you use less petrol, but the key is spending less time behind the wheel, period. "The best thing you can do is drive less, cycle and walk more, and use transit more," said Alter. "Your health is better, your budget is better, and you're not putting out any carbon dioxide."

This is easier said than done if you don't already live in a walkable community, but if you have the option to use mass transit or strap on your bicycle helmet, use it. If you must drive, choose a fuel-efficient vehicle and drive to save gas and emissions — stick to the speed limit, keep your tires properly inflated, empty your trunk of heavy items, and accelerate and brake gently for better fuel efficiency. Some incentive: Driving aggressively can decrease gas mileage by 33% at highway speeds.

*Keep your feet on the ground.* Where practical, rethink that jaunt via plane. Air travel "has an enormous environmental impact relative to most other forms of travel," said Cam Walker, campaigns coordinator for Friends of the Earth in Australia. Instead, consider vacationing within driving distance—or better yet, take the train.

*Buy less, or buy better quality things.* Think about how much "stuff" you own. "A big part of Danish emissions are linked to our consumption," said Mattias Söderberg, chair of the ACT alliance climate change advisory group in Denmark. "To reduce it we need a change in consumption culture. Do we really need all the gadgets we buy? And do we always need the newest one?" Acquiring fewer things and making the ones you own last longer will reduce waste and energy use overall.

Don't forget about reusing and recycling things. "You can make a difference by buying second-hand, borrowing something you'll only need once and repairing

items to give them a new lease on life,” said Melanie Kramers, a spokesperson for the UK’s Friends of the Earth.

*Recycle plus.* Recycling is one of the easiest and most visible steps you can take, but it takes energy to collect those items and convert them into something new. That’s not to say that you shouldn’t recycle — but you shouldn’t stop there. Don’t forget that you can also recycle all those old electronics stashed in drawers and closets in your home. In the US, check [earth911.com](http://earth911.com) for drop-off locations. In the UK, search [DontBinItBringIt.org](http://DontBinItBringIt.org). You can even get money back for old electronics via sites like [Gazelle.com](http://Gazelle.com) and [CashInYourGadgets.co.uk](http://CashInYourGadgets.co.uk).

*Adjust your thermostat.* The choices you make regarding heating and cooling your home are some of the most impactful things you can do in terms of reducing your carbon footprint, said Leo Hickman, the chief adviser on climate change for the UK’s World Wide Fund for Nature. Keeping the temperature a little lower in the winter and higher in the summer can make a big difference, as can using a programmable thermostat, which can save you about \$180 every year in energy costs, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency.

**Do it later:** *Downsize.* Consider settling in a smaller house or flat. It will mean less space to heat and cool and fewer things needed to outfit your abode. Choosing something smaller may mean you can live closer to where you work, or near an urban centre where you can walk or bike more.

*Be smart about milestones.* Consider the amount of money and resources that go into things you (hopefully) do only once, such as a wedding. “That one day can have the equivalent of an ecological impact of a whole lifetime of a low-income individual when we’re spending \$20,000 or \$30,000 or even \$50,000 on an average American wedding,” Assadourian said.

Having a smaller gathering, being mindful of producing less waste, or holding a series of small, local parties are all alternatives.

Death and funerals can involve toxic chemicals and expensive (non-biodegradable) coffins. “You can write into your will that you want a green funeral wrapped in a shroud rather than a fancy hardwood coffin and help to renew the cycle of life,” Assadourian said.

**Do it smarter:** *Think like the Swiss.* Switzerland is small and densely populated, leading its inhabitants to be more aware of limitations in resources and space.

“Frugality is therefore much more part of the culture,” said Anja Kollmuss, senior policy researcher with Carbon Market Watch in Zurich and Berlin. “There is more environmental awareness.”

To jumpstart your own green mind-set, visit the WWF’s [carbon calculator](#) to estimate the size of your footprint.

Sign up for [daily green tips](#) from the UK’s Friends of the Earth. A sample tip: Instead of pouring a leftover half-empty bottle of beer down the drain, use it to supplement your compost pile, which will benefit from its yeast and nitrogen.