

It's Easy Bein' Green

Part 1: Energy-efficient homes

By Linda Costello

Being a Druid means my spirituality is much more attuned with the cycles of nature. This tends to make me much more concerned with what we can do to live more harmoniously with our planet. This article is the first in a series of articles about how to live a greener lifestyle.

Do you live in an energy-efficient home?

Whether you do or don't, here are some simple techniques to make your home more energy efficient, which will, in turn, help you to save money, to make an impact on your health and well-being, as well as contribute to future sustainability.

To give you some background about me, I have been interested in sustainable living and environmental concerns since the early 90's when I worked the Global Action Plan – a twelve-week endeavor to systematically make one's home more energy efficient. I have lived in a sustainable living community, and spent some time off-grid in an earthship in Taos. I plan to have an off-grid sustainable living retreat center in the future. I am currently in the process of obtaining the National Association of Realtors' Green designation on my real estate license, and I do my best to live a green lifestyle.

There are several ways you can make your home more environmentally efficient. Many of them require a significant initial investment, but over time, you make it back in savings, and these days there are also many tax incentives available.

Today, however, I will be informing you of three relatively inexpensive things you can do to bring down energy costs and make your home more comfortable involving your appliances, lighting, and heating and cooling.

Here is some information about Energy Star appliances. According to the EPA, appliance use comprises 18% of your total home energy bill. Energy Star appliances are guaranteed to use 10-50% less electricity than their counterparts. According to an article in the real estate section on MSN, if one in 10 homes replaced their appliances with energy star appliances, it would be like planting 1.7 million new acres of trees. It's also helpful to run your appliances during off-peak hours as much as possible, especially if they emit heat. For example, in our household, we run the dishwasher at night and only when full. We often do laundry after 7 pm also.

In regards to lighting, of course the most energy efficient way to increase light without incurring an energy cost is to use natural lighting... open a shade or a door, or install a skylight. But we all need light when the sun goes down, and that means lightbulbs.

Many people currently use Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs in their homes. Nowadays, you can buy a CFL bulb for a little more than a dollar a bulb. They use 66% less energy than incandescents. Replacing a 100 watt incandescent bulb with a 32 watt CFL will save you \$30 over the life of just one bulb!

There are disposal issues with CFLs due to the fluorocarbons, so in the long run, I predict that the light of the future will be the LED bulb. However there are still some developmental issues with LEDs for regular home use, and the cost of \$15 per bulb doesn't yet justify the savings. So for now, replace your bulbs with CFLs for the best savings on light.

Heating and/or cooling your home is what makes up 50% of your energy costs. There are a few simple ways to cut your heating and cooling bill. Ceiling fans cost about \$10.00 per year to run, and they will make a big difference, especially in your cooling costs, by redistributing and circulating air. Programmable thermostats also make a big difference. You can set them at different temperatures during the times when you know you are home and active, when you are sleeping, and when you know you won't be home. This will greatly reduce your energy costs. And the third way is simply to use the concept of shading the south side of your house. You can install thermal shades or curtains that can be opened or closed to allow in heat and light or to keep it out, depending on whether it is winter or summer.

When I lived at the sustainable living community, we used this, coupled with a greenhouse on the south side of the house, as our primary heating method in the winter. Currently, my home has indoor shading, shade screens on the outer windows, and we use foliage to shade the south side in the summer. In the winter, we cut away the foliage and open wide the shades.

There are many more ways you can live a greener lifestyle, but these three simple practices will go a long way to making a difference in your energy consumption:

Buying energy-star appliances
Changing your lighting sources
Cutting down on Heating and cooling by using ceiling fans, programmable thermostats, and south side shading

You will be benefiting your wallet, your health and the future of our world community by being more eco-aware.

It's easy bein' green.