

SUSTAINABLE LIVING: WHAT WE CAN DO TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By Linda Costello

Something near and dear to my heart is living lightly on this planet, living in harmony with nature as much as possible.

When I was a little girl – four or five years old – I found comfort in nature. I used to have a secret hideaway under a lilac bush, where I would talk to the “fairies.” In my backyard, there was a swampy area, where I would spend countless hours climbing trees, catching frogs, picking wildflowers, and observing the ways that the seasons changed my environment.

When I was a teenager, I used to find solace in a grove of pine trees that was down the street from my house. I used to make “sacrifices” to the earth by burying my young, angst, love poetry at the base of trees, and I made friends with the running brook, the wood ferns, and the creatures of the woods. In fact, it was in these woods that I had my first trance experience that came about from unfocusing my vision, and being able to see the energy streaming through all of the living entities around me.

As an adult, I became much more ecologically-minded as I celebrated the turning of the seasons in a ritualistic way.

In the early 1990’s, I was part of a group of people who followed the Global Action Plan – a way to make your home more environmentally sound. In 1999, I dated someone who wrote his Master’s thesis on environmentalism, and did his best to live his beliefs. We formed EarthLove together, an environmental education resource to teach others to live lightly on the planet.

In 2001-2002, I lived in a community devoted to sustainable living. We had an acre of land within Phoenix proper, and we lived without air conditioning or heat. We built a greenhouse on the south side of the house, which captured much of the sun’s heat in the winter, and we held that heat by placing bottles filled with water against the walls that got the most direct sun. This also served as a way to hold water, in case we ever needed fresh drinking water. We had a wood stove for those nights when we just needed to get the chill out. (In Phoenix, it doesn’t take much.)

In the summer, we took down the plastic on the greenhouse and replaced it with shade cloth. We also had deciduous trees on the south side of the house that shaded us from the direct sun, but in winter, the leaves would be shed to allow the most heat.

We also had a hot tub. The hot tub was a real blessing, because it warmed us in the winter and cooled us in the summer. In winter, we would use the hot tub upon arising in the morning to raise our body temperature, so we could shower and dress with comfort. In the summer, the temperature of the water would make the air around us feel cooler.

We added extra insulation to the house which helped to keep in the warm in the winter and the cool in the summer. We used shading to control the entry of sunlight in other areas of the house besides the south side.

We didn’t have the money for solar panels, but we used our climate as much as possible to our benefit. Our washer was outside, and the grey water was used to water our garden. We dried our clothes by hanging them outside, near the washer. We had a compost area which was used in the garden. Composting was a regular part of our daily routine.

We had the precursors of permaculture on our land. We had organic vegetable gardens both inside the greenhouse and out. We even had a chicken for eggs and to help fertilize the soil.

We talked about building earthships on the property. Earthships are homes built out of recycled materials and rammed earth. They are made to decrease one’s ecological footprint on the earth. They work in tangent with the seasons, using solar energy as the only energy source, and water is harvested from rainfall, stored in a cistern, and filtered to be used throughout the house. I had the pleasure of spending Thanksgiving 2000 with Michael Reynolds, the architect who came up with earthships, a delightful man who walks his talk.

We could have done more, but we were doing SO MUCH more than most people do in a metropolitan city.

I learned a lot from that time, and have incorporated much of what I learned into my daily life. For example, for the past four years, I have maintained an herb garden near the door closest to my kitchen. I have also done as much as I can to

shade the south side of my house during the hot months. For a long time, I was even composting.

We can all do more to live more sustainably on the earth. Here are some ideas on how you can change your life to live more harmoniously on this wonderful, beautiful planet.

One of the easiest ways to change our living style is to replace all of our incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs. Compact fluorescent bulbs use ten percent of the wattage of an incandescent bulb and last ten times longer. There are also less carbon emissions due to the way they are made. In addition, incandescent bulbs are heaters in disguise, so there is an even greater energy savings in air conditioning costs.

It is also good to remember to turn off lights in rooms where they are not needed. This results in significant energy savings.

Another significant energy savings can come about with the installation of a programmable thermostat. They can be bought relatively inexpensively at Home Depot, and are fairly easy to install. Programming your thermostat to automatically go off when you are not home and on just before coming home will make a big difference. I also program them to use less energy when I am sleeping.

To aid in maintaining more even house temperatures, you can shade the south side of your house in the summer months, and unshade it during the winter months. This can be accomplished with shades and curtains in the house, or by planting deciduous trees and bushes on the south side. In summer, they are full of leaves, and in the winter, they are bare to let the light in.

Energy savings can also be realized by insulating your hot water tank. Although this is more crucial in colder climates, the insulation can make a difference here also. Run high output electrical appliances such as your clothes washer or dishwasher during off-peak hours. Hang up clothes outside to use less energy with your dryer. Here in Arizona, they will be dry in minutes!

Speaking of the Arizona sun, this is a great climate for solar energy. I know that solar panels are expensive, however there are many tax breaks for people who install them, not to mention grants from the energy companies. Within 11 years after installing solar panels, you would have free

electricity. Imagine never having to pay an electric bill again! If that's too drastic a way to go, another option is to install solar hot water in your home.

Plastic is another environmental concern. Plastic water bottles are becoming an increasing environmental problem. The state of New York is encouraging people to drink tap water over store bought water, as approximately 90% of plastic bottles go into landfills. A solution is to buy a good stainless steel bottle and refill it.

Using canvas bags for shopping is much more preferable to plastic bags. And if you do use plastic bags, remember to reuse them as trash can liners, or lunch sacks, and when you are done, recycle them as much as possible.

Speaking of shopping, it is best to buy local, organic groceries as much as possible for several reasons. There is the obvious fuel savings when food doesn't have to be shipped in from other areas, but another, less obvious reason is that foods grown locally usually have more actual vitamins and minerals in them, because they aren't leached away into the atmosphere by sitting in some warehouse. Organic vegetables will increase the goodness in your food even more, as they are produced in rich, non-chemically fertilized soil.

Chemicals are responsible for much of our ill health. We can further help the earth to heal if we use bio-degradable cleaning agents. All of the soap products we use end up in the ground, and ultimately filter down into the ground water. Granted, much of the poison gets filtered out before it reaches the deeper reservoirs. However, the chemicals are captured in the earth. In the long run, that can't be healthy.

And lastly, I must mention fuel consumption. We can all help the environment by carpooling more, by walking when possible, using public transportation when possible, and by buying fuel efficient vehicles, perhaps even hybrids.

Living more consciously on the earth, recognizing the effects of our choices, will help us to ultimately live healthier, more fulfilling lives. Choosing to walk instead of driving to the corner store will result in more exercise. Choosing to eat locally and organically will result in more nutrition, and less that our bodies will have to eliminate. We can heal ourselves as we heal the earth.