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Going Green: 12 Simple Steps for 2012

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As we head into 2012, many of us will be resolving to lose those few extra pounds, save more money, or spend a few more hours with our families and friends. But there are also some resolutions we can make to make our lives a little greener. Each of us, especially in the United States, can make a commitment to reducing our environmental impacts.

Here are 12 simple steps that you can take to be more green in the new year. (Photo credit: Julie Carney, Gardens for Health International)

The United Nations has designated 2012 as the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All. Broadening access to sustainable energy is essential to solving many of the world's challenges, including food production, security, and poverty.

Hunger, poverty, and climate change are issues that we can all help address. Here are 12 simple steps to go green in 2012:

(1) Recycle

Recycling programs exist in cities and towns across the United States, helping to save energy and protect the environment. 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. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, for each pound of aluminum recovered, Americans save the energy resources necessary to generate roughly 7.5 kilowatt-hours of electricity—enough to power a city the size of Pittsburgh for six years!

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 in 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. China also recently pledged to replace

the 1 billion incandescent bulbs used in its government offices with more energy efficient models within five years.

What you can do:

- A bill in Congress to eliminate incandescent 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 both 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. The energy required to produce and transport these bottles could fuel an estimated 1.5 million cars for a year, yet approximately 75 percent of water bottles are not recycled—they end up in landfills, litter roadsides, and pollute waterways and oceans. And while public tap water is subject to strict safety regulations, the bottled water industry is not required to report testing results for its products. According to a study, 10 of the most popular brands of bottled water contain a wide range of pollutants, including pharmaceuticals, fertilizer residue, and arsenic.

What you can do:

- Fill up your glasses and reusable water bottles with water from the sink. The United States has more than 160,000 public water systems, and by eliminating bottled water you can help to keep nearly 1 million tons of bottles out of the landfill, as well as save money on water costs.

(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). Grocery stores, bakeries, and other food providers throw away tons of food daily that is perfectly edible but is cosmetically imperfect or has passed its expiration date. In response, food recovery programs run by homeless shelters or food banks collect this food and use it to provide meals for the hungry, helping to divert food away from landfills and into the bellies of people who need it most.

What you can do:

- Encourage your local restaurants and grocery stores to partner with food rescue organizations, like City Harvest in New York City or Second Harvest Heartland in Minnesota.
- Go through your cabinets and shelves and donate any non-perishable 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. Author and consumer advocate Michael Shuman argues that local small businesses are more sustainable because they are often more accountable for their actions, have smaller environmental footprints, and innovate to meet local conditions—providing models for others to learn from.

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. Now, cities across the country are investing in new mobility options that provide exercise and offer an alternative to being cramped in subways or buses. Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis, and Washington, D.C. have major bike sharing programs that allow people to rent bikes for short-term use. Similar programs exist in other cities, and more are planned for places from Miami, Florida, to Madison, Wisconsin.

What you can do:

- If available, use your city's bike share program to run short errands or commute to work. Memberships are generally inexpensive (only \$75 for the year in Washington, D.C.), and by eliminating transportation costs, as well as a gym membership, you can save quite a bit of money!
- Even if without bike share programs, many cities and towns are incorporating bike lanes and trails, making it easier and safer to use your 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. According to the University of California Transportation Center, each shared car replaces 15 personally owned vehicles, and roughly 80 percent of more than 6,000 car-sharing households surveyed across North America got rid of their cars after joining a sharing service. In 2009, car-sharing was credited with reducing U.S. carbon emissions by more than 482,000 tons. 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! As of July 2011, there were 26 such programs in the U.S., with more than 560,000 people sharing over 10,000 vehicles. Even if you don't want to get rid of your own car, using a shared car when traveling in a city can greatly reduce the challenges of finding parking (car share programs have their own designated spots), 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. Researchers at the FAO and the United Nations Development Programme estimate that 200 million city dwellers around the world are already growing and selling their own food, feeding some 800 million of their neighbors. Growing a garden doesn't have to take up a lot of space, and in light of high food prices and recent food safety scares, 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. Yet global meat production has experienced a 20 percent growth rate since 2000 to meet the per capita increase of meat consumption of about 42 kilograms.

What you can do:

- You don't have to become a vegetarian or vegan, but by simply cutting down on the amount of meat you consume can go a long way. Consider substituting one meal day with a vegetarian option. And if you are unable to think of how to substitute your meat-heavy diet, websites such as Meatless Monday and Eating Well offer numerous vegetarian recipes that are healthy for you and the environment.

The most successful and lasting New Year's resolutions are those that are practiced regularly and have an important goal. Watching the ball drop in Times Square happens only once a year, but for more and more people across the world, the impacts of hunger, poverty, and climate change are felt every day. Thankfully, simple practices, such as recycling or riding a bike, can have great impact. As we prepare to ring in the new year, let's all resolve to make 2012 a healthier, happier, and greener year for all.

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