



# 20 free or low-cost ideas for going green and saving money

Relearning how to conserve money and energy the low-cost way

We've all experienced it: draw-dropping astonishment at finding an incredibly-priced green product. Whether it be organic red peppers in the grocery aisles, bamboo towels at the department store, or a hybrid car, the sticker shock can smart for months, or even years, after the first exposure, convincing us that it's impossible to be green on a budget. We all want to do our part, but how can we afford to be kind to the earth in times like these?

What we forget is that our ancestors, even as recently as 50 years ago, were successfully developing ways to cut their expenses. And not surprisingly, the wisdom of old still proves that being frugal, living more simply, and looking for home-grown (literally!) solutions to problems can mean having a smaller environmental footprint.

So, here's some for you to start living more greenly. We hope you'll agree that being green can have inherent financial benefits.

## Whole house

### 1. Seal air leaks throughout your house

According to the US Department of Energy, you could be adding 10 percent to your monthly energy bills by leaving air leaks unchecked. These leaks could be hiding all over your home—windows and doors, water and furnace flues, recessed lighting, ducts, attic entrances, plumbing and utility access points, electrical outlets and switches, and

chimney flashing. With a simple tube (or two) of caulking and some easy-to-install weather stripping, you could have these spots sealed up in no time and at very little cost.

*Cost: \$5 for one tube of caulking, \$20-30 for weather stripping (you may require multiples of each, depending on how many holes you need to plug)*

*Estimated savings: Calculate your estimated savings using this Home Energy Saver Calculator*

### 2. Replace incandescent bulbs with CFLs

You've heard it hundreds of times before: compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) are much more efficient than regular incandescent bulbs. In fact, they use 65 to 80 percent less energy and last between eight and 10 times longer than regular incandescent bulbs, so the savings just keep accumulating long after your purchase. Their price has traditionally been higher than regular bulbs, but they've dropped to nearly-comparable prices (\$3 for ENERGY STAR spirals).

And today they come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, so don't feel like you're limited to the classic "coiled" CFL. Options include decor CFLs, flicker flame tip CFLs, 3-way CFLs, dimmable CFLs, globe CFLs, anti-bug CFLs, outdoor post CFLs, flood like CFLs, and spiral CFLs in a range of sizes, too. Just don't forget to recycle

spent CFLs (check out Earth911.com for recycling locations).

*Cost: \$9 for three bulbs*

*Estimated savings: \$150 in energy savings for three bulbs*

### 3. Fix water leaks

Do you hear something? Is it the sound of your toilet running, or a faucet dripping? If so, start counting the pennies each moment costs you, 'cause these are pricey oversights. A leaking toilet can waste 50 gallons of water daily, while a dripping faucet can add 1,000 gallons of water weekly to your water bill. And those are just the obvious sources of water waste. Leaks anywhere along your plumbing lines—whether they be in your bathroom, kitchen, laundry room, or outdoor irrigation system—will cost you. On average, 14 percent of all water used by American households is wasted!

If you're in need of some advice on how to fix your leaks without calling the plumber, do a search online for your particular problem and you're likely to find the answers you seek. Some simple caulking and inexpensive parts available from the hardware store may just do the trick.

*Cost: \$5-50 depending on the parts you require*

*Estimated savings: \$60+ yearly, depending on the size of leaks and utility prices*

#### 4. Adjust your shades

And by that, we don't mean your tinted spectacles. We're talking about your window shades and blinds. Many of us can't afford to replace our windows outright, but there are some simple things you can do to improve their efficiency, one of which is adjusting the window coverings throughout the day.

For instance, during cold weather, open wide the blinds during the day to allow sunshine to warm your space naturally, and then close them at night to block heat from escaping while you sleep. Conversely, during hot weather, be sure to lower your shades (and close the windows) during the day to minimize heat transfer, and then open everything up in the evening to cool things off.

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: \$10-100 in annual energy bills depending on your local climate, insulating effect of your blinds, and direction of your windows*

### Kitchen

#### 5. Grow and prepare your own food

Fresh produce can be one of the biggest dings in your monthly grocery bill, but growing your own can be a low-cost way of feeding your family, even if for only the summer months. Get your kids involved and teach them about where food originates in the process.

Even if you can't grow your own food because of lack of space, time, or experience, you can cut your grocery bills by avoiding prepared foods, like frozen dinners, pre-packaged lunches, and so on. And for added savings, pack your own lunch (in reusable containers, of course) instead of eating out.

Both of these options will have the added benefit eating healthier meals and cutting the amount of garbage you create. Plus, if you make sure you eat leftovers before they spoil, you'll save even more.

*Cost: \$3 per pack of seeds*

*Estimated savings: One package of tomato seeds will grow about \$60 worth of tomatoes; Preparing your own food can cut your grocery bill by 25 percent*

#### 6. Chuck the bottle habit

Buying bottled water is an expensive habit—at \$1.30+ per bottle, the cost per gallon for the convenience of plastic-wrapped water is about \$8.50! Not only does this habit amount to piles and piles of plastic bottles, most of which aren't recycled, it's expensive. If you were to pay that per-gallon price for all the water you use, your monthly utility bill might be close to \$10,000. Seems a bit much, doesn't it?

Many drink bottled water because they believe the stuff flowing from the tap isn't safe. But contrary to popular myth, most drinking water in the US is quite safe. If you're worried, get your local water utility to send you a water quality report, or take a sample of your water in for testing. When you're satisfied that your tap water is safe, buy yourself a reusable water bottle—or two or three (one for home, one for work, and one for your workout?). They'll cost you about \$15 each, but will save you hundreds if not thousands in water bottle costs every year.

*Cost: \$15 per bottle*

*Estimated savings: \$400+ annually, depending on how much you drink and cost of bottled water*

#### 7. Cut back your meat consumption

Although you may think you have to spend more money to prepare a meatless meal, you may be surprised to know that it can actually be cheaper. This shouldn't surprise too much when you think about the fact that most of the world's poorest people have a vegetarian diet, and they're able to afford the basics: beans, rice, and corn.

But let's look at it more closely: animal protein—cheap cuts of beef, ground beef, or boneless chicken breasts—can cost

anywhere between \$3 and \$5 per pound. Vegetarian staples, on the other hand, range in price between \$1 per pound for beans and lentils to \$2 per pound for tofu. Now, if you go for the imitation meats such as veggie burgers and tofurky, you'll be paying more like \$5 per pound. You get the idea.

But there's more to saving money by choosing vegetarian than the grocery bill. Vegetarian diets are also healthier, resulting in lower health care bills and an increased life expectancy (more years to work!). And reducing your meat intake can dose out heavy portions of environmental savings, too! Many farm animals exude loads of greenhouse gas emissions during their lives (during the normal course of digestion). What this means is that you can do more to slow climate change by choosing a few meatless meals every week than buying local produce or swapping your 4x4 for a hybrid car!

*Cost: Potentially less per-meal than meat eating*

*Estimated savings: \$3-9 per meal (for a family of 5)*

### Bathroom

#### 8. Flush with less water

Although purchasing a new high-efficiency or dual flush toilet will save you significantly on your monthly water bills, it does require an investment that's usually more than \$100. But don't despair! You can modify your toilet to flush with less water at little to no expense. Simply put some pebbles or rocks in a one gallon plastic jug (from soda or milk, for instance), then fill the rest up with water. Drop the jug gently into your toilet tank, and presto! You've just reduced your per-flush water use by one gallon. If you're squeamish of this home-grown fix-it method, check to see if your local municipality has a toilet dam project—kits that include plastic dams that do the same job as the jug described

above. These are often offered for free or for a very low cost.

And at the risk of totally turning you off, may we also suggest that you consider a time-honored water-saving habit you could implement in your home: "If it's yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down." This simple ditty reminds us that we don't necessarily need to flush every time we use the toilet. As long as guests aren't scheduled to pop by, this is a great way as a family to lower your water bill at no cost whatsoever.

*Cost: \$0-15*

*Estimated savings: \$30+ annually, depending on the size of the toilet dam and your water costs*

### 9. Install a low-flow showerhead

Amp up your water savings by showering with a little less H<sub>2</sub>O. Low-flow showerheads do the trick by either combining air with your water flow or lessening the size of the water apertures to increase pressure. Federal regulations now require all showerheads to release no more than 2.5 gallons per minute (gpm), but ultra-efficient models can now cut that down to 1.0 gpm, saving you close to 50 percent or nearly 8,000 gallons per family.

And remember, when you save water in the shower, you're not only slashing your water bill, you're lowering your energy bill. That's because you need energy to heat shower water, and water heaters are anything but efficient with their energy consumption.

*Cost: \$8-50 depending on how many extra features you desire*

*Estimated savings: \$200 every year in water and energy costs (depending on your utility prices)*

### 10. Use a shower timer

Stop splashing water down the drain with 30 minute showers and you could be in for some additional savings. A

shower timer can really help, especially if you've got teenagers who like to linger in the warm. Encourage all of your family members to shave one minute off their daily shower routine every month by employing some simple rules: no shaving, teeth brushing, or plucking while under the nozzle.

While ultra-fancy models can cost upwards of \$400, simple little shower timers can be as low as \$6 to \$15, which will pay for themselves in less than a year (but don't take our word for it, check out this calculator to find out how much you stand to save.

*Cost: \$0-15 per timer*

*Estimated savings: \$25 per person annually for every minute shaved off shower time*

### 11. Shut the tap off while brushing and shaving

We're all guilty of leaving the tap running now and then, but some folks have a hard time breaking the habit for every day bathroom activities. Whether they leave the water flowing while they soap their hands, lather their pearly whites, or apply shaving cream, they're letting pennies flow away every day. Shutting the tap off, like other water-related eco-activities, will save you twice over: once for the water and once for the heat. Water use alone can be reduced by 3,000 gallons per person every year. And it won't cost you a dime.

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: \$92 annually for a family of four*

## Driving

### 12. Change your commute

You may consider driving to work a necessary, aggravating evil, but have you considered that changing your commuting habits may cut back on transportation bills as well as your own personal stress levels? The truth is that those who carpool, take

public transit, telecommute, or walk, run, or cycle to work have lower stress levels, higher satisfaction with their employment, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and, you guessed it, more money in their pockets.

So this year, think about how you might swap your solo-driving habit for a more eco-friendly commuting option. Do any of your colleagues live close enough to share a ride with? Is public transportation accessible in your neighborhood? Are you close enough to work to walk, run, or ride your bike? Would your employer consider letting you telecommute even one or two days every week? Many options now exist, and your employer may have some incentives for choosing a greener commute that will make it even more cost-effective.

*Cost: Varies depending on the cost of cycling/running equipment, public transit passes, and home office supplies.*

*Estimated savings: Although savings depend on a myriad of factors, here are some national yearly averages: \$1,400 if you take public transit or get to work on foot or by bicycle; \$455-1,000 if you carpool or telecommute just one day per week.*

### 13. Ensure your tires are properly inflated

Most people are driving around on underinflated tires (around 7.5 pounds, actually), but these oft-forgotten transportation necessities could be adding to how much gas you're burning every month. Underinflated tires will cost 0.4 percent in fuel efficiency for every pound, which means more greenhouse gas emissions and higher bills at the pump. Tires that are improperly inflated will also wear your tires more quickly. Doing a monthly check of your tire pressure will ensure you're not saddled with these unnecessary expenses.

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: 8 cents per gallon*



#### 14. Ease up on the pedals

We're all in a hurry, but driving faster will raise your monthly fuel bill unnecessarily. And those guilty of racing around with their foot riding the break will be costing themselves even more. So, just changing some simple driving habits could put more cash in your pocket. For every 5 miles per hour (mph) you slow down on the highway, you'll cut fuel consumption by 7 percent. Take your foot off the break while driving and you could improve your fuel efficiency by as much as 35 percent. It adds up!

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: \$1.15 per gallon (combined)*

#### 15. Cut car idling

Whether you're waiting for your kids following soccer practice, driving through for fast food, or picking up a sluggish carpool partner, you'd do well to shut your engine off. That's because idling for just two minutes equals the same fuel consumption as if you were driving for one mile! And don't believe the myths that restarting your engine is hard on the mechanics—they're not true. So next time you're waiting, for whatever reason, remember to turn the key and sit without consuming energy.

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: \$0.01 per gallon/two minutes not idling*

### Home office

#### 16. Reuse paper

Although buying 100 percent post-consumer recycled paper is a great way to protect our forests, it can be somewhat more expensive than regular paper (a paltry \$0.40/500 sheets). But if you can't spare the extra pennies, you can do something to help save paper simply by reusing. Whether you turn envelopes into grocery lists, load one tray of your printer with

already single-sided paper, or turn scraps into notepads, you'll be cutting your overall paper consumption. Even better, print double-sided in the first place!

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: \$5 for 500 sheets reused.*

#### 17. Stock up on rechargeable batteries

You could be chucking money in the garbage with every regular battery you send to the landfill. Not only does this add pounds of toxic heavy metals to the earth where it can leech into our groundwater and food supplies, it's an expensive habit!

Here's the math: It will cost you about \$35 for a single pack of four rechargeable batteries, plus a good charger at about \$40. Yes, a high up-front investment, but wait, you can reuse those batteries for remote controls, powered toys, electronic tools, and flashlights for hundreds of charges over many years. You'll likely pay less than a couple of dollars in electricity to charge them (over the lifetime of the battery), resulting in a total bill around \$80. Compare to what you'd pay for 150 packs (about the equivalent of one pack of rechargeables) of disposable batteries: \$750 (at \$5 for four batteries).

*Cost: \$80 for battery charger and one package of rechargeable batteries*

*Estimated savings: \$670 per package of rechargeable batteries*

#### 18. Use your computer's power management features

Whether you know it or not, your computer likely has some power management settings that can be set to conserve energy, especially when the thing isn't in use. Programming these features for ultimate savings can cut your overall energy bill a good deal. So, don't wait, go to your computer's power management system

settings and make sure your monitor and your hard drive are set to go into power-saving mode after 5 to 15 minutes. Easy.

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: \$40-80 depending on your electricity price*

### Lifestyle

#### 19. Become a library buff

Need a new cookbook for some inspiration? Looking for advice on how to do your taxes? Or hoping to just escape into the world of some fantasy novel? Whatever your reading pleasure, why not check out your local library for free access to books, DVDs, CDs, magazines, and more. The cost for a yearly membership is usually \$20 or less, making it a super-saver if you're an avid reader.

*Cost: \$20 or less*

*Estimated savings: \$15-500 depending on how many books, DVDs, and CDs you buy in a year*

#### 20. Borrow from the neighbors

Whether you need a wrench for a quick plumbing fix or a hedge trimmer for your backyard landscaping project, consider borrowing them from a neighbor who might already own these tools. It'll save you from purchasing the new items yourself, plus will reduce your overall consumption, which is always good for the planet.

*Cost: \$0*

*Estimated savings: \$10-200 (sky's the limit, really!) ☺*