

THE EARTH DAY THE POLLUTION STOOD STILL

Earth Day Activities to Reduce Pollution and Create a Sustainable Future

Only certain people need to worry about participating in Earth Day---those who breathe air, drink water, and care about the future of life on the planet. So, unless you're part of the invasion force from planet Klaxon-5 that's been monitoring Grinning Planet transmissions from its stealthified location 8 miles above the surface, we've compiled a slew of great Earth Day activities for you---things you can do to make the earth less polluted, greener, and more sustainable for the long term.

Your first and most important Earth Day activity is ...don't get overwhelmed! It's important that we all start making better progress on these things, but don't go into green overload by trying to take on our whole list. Leave a few Earth Day activities for next year!

Here are a couple of strategies for taking on a reasonable number of the listed Earth Day activities:

- For Earth Day itself, just pick one or two things.
- Then, compile a list of additional Earth Day activities to work on for the rest of the year---say, one per month.

Our Earth Day Activities are listed in groups. Each Earth Day activity has been given one, two, or three green stars. All of the activities are worthwhile, but the more stars, the more positive impact the activity has on the earth, on our air and water, and on our future. Choose wisely, grasshopper!

Earth Day Activities for Cleaner Motoring

Trade In ★★★

Does your car or truck get high gas mileage? Do you *need* such a large vehicle? Maybe you can spend some time on Earth Day thinking about trading it in on a vehicle that gets better mileage and emits fewer pollutants. Yahoo! Autos (<http://autos.yahoo.com/>) and US EPA's GreenVehicles (<http://www.epa.gov/greenvehicles/>) site have good tools for evaluating both characteristics.

Tune Up ★★

A car that is properly tuned operates more efficiently---burns less gas, emits fewer pollutants---than a car that is not in a well maintained state. If it's been a while since

your car was tuned up, make an Earth Day note to take it to the auto-doctor during the coming week.

Turn Off ★★★

Reducing the number of miles you drive in your car is good for the planet and good for your pocketbook. A good Earth Day activity is trying to figure out how you can drive less by doing things like...

- combining trips,
- biking instead of driving,
- getting a job closer to work,
- joining a van pool or using mass transit,
- substituting fun stay-at-home activities for fun out-of-the-house activities.

Coming up with ideas to reduce your fuel usage is a good family project for Earth Day since kids' activities often make up a large part of a family's outings. Getting "buy-in" from the kids by making them part of the discussion is important to successful implementation.

Also, if you know how many miles you drove last year, it would be good to set a target for how much you want to reduce that, and then show the kids how to track it on a monthly basis to see how you're doing. (*Related GP article: How to Beat High Gas Price* (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2004/11-30/beat-high-gas-prices-improve-gas-mileage-article.htm>))

Slow Down ★

The faster you go, the more air resistance your vehicle encounters. The resistance is proportional to the *cube* (triple) of how fast you're going. More speed means way more air resistance, which means the engine uses a lot more fuel because it has to work much harder to maintain the vehicle's speed. So, speed does kill... your gas mileage.

Buy Sins ★

No matter how efficient and clean your car is, with every mile you drive you're still pumping out CO₂, the primary greenhouse gas responsible for the over-warming of the planet. You can "get green" by spending some green out of your wallet at TerraPass (<http://www.terrapass.com/>), which has programs to counterbalance your miles driven with investments in carbon-reducing projects.

Earth Day Activities Related to Your House

Install a Solar Hot Water Heater ★★★

This is a great bang-for-the-buck technology for any house in a locale that gets normal amounts of sun. That may leave Seattle out, but for most of us, solar hot water heaters make a lot of sense. They costs more than a regular water heater up front, but because water heaters are a big part of your energy bill, they pay back quickly---and then it's

"free money" from there on out! You can learn more at the Department of Energy's web site (http://www.eere.energy.gov/consumer/your_home/water_heating/index.cfm/mytopic=12850).

***Install Solar PV Panels* ★★**

Solar photovoltaic (PV) panels generate electricity from the sun. Solar panels hooked up to your house help reduce the amount of electricity you have to get from the grid (which is mostly generated from fossil fuels and nuclear power).

You definitely want your installer to have experience in designing PV solutions that are right for each unique situation and customer goal. You can find qualified solar installers at FindSolar.com (<http://www.findsolar.com/>), though we note that this is not a complete list of known qualified installers, so ask around and check the yellow pages too.

Earth Day Activities At Home Whether You Own or Rent

***Go CFL* ★**

Swap out those old energy-wasting incandescent bulbs and get with the compact fluorescent program. These long-lasting, energy-conserving bulbs come in so many shapes and wattages these days, and the prices are now so low, that it's a no-brainer to change almost all of your home's bulbs to CFLs. (The only exceptions would be dimmer-controlled lights and lights that are only rarely turned on.) If you rent, save the incandescent bulbs you swap out so you can take your CFLs with you when you move.

***Turn Things Off* ★**

Make an Earth Day commitment to do better at turning things off when they aren't in use so you cut down on electricity usage (and the pollution that goes with electricity generation). The old idea that things take less energy if they're left on for a little while vs. being turned off and then back on again in, say, 10 minutes is simply not true. It's always better to turn things off. You may also be interested in our article about fighting vampire power (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2004/10-26/vampire-power-electricity-article.htm>)---the juice that today's modern electronics use even when off.

Earth Day Activities in Your Yard

***Go Chemical-Free* ★★**

If you're a user of standard lawn fertilizers and pesticides, then one of the best Earth Day activities for you is to figure out how you're going to stop doing that! There are a number of important reasons why doing so will be good for the Earth and good for you. Please check out our articles:

- Lawn Care Tips
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/03-07/lawn-care-tips-article.htm>

- Organic Lawn Care
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/03-16/organic-lawn-care-article.htm>
- Dandelion Removal
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/03-16/dandelion-removal-article.htm>

Create a Low-Maintenance Yard ★★

You can reduce your lawn mowing chores (or eliminated lawn mowing altogether) and save money in the long run by converting part of your lawn to ground cover, shrubs, and other well adapted native plants that require no mowing, no watering, and minimal maintenance. You can Google "permaculture" for more info, or find permaculture books on Amazon.com (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/amazon/books/search/permaculture.htm>).

Create an Edible Landscape ★★★

A step up from converting lawn areas into low-maintenance ground cover and landscaping is to turn part of your yard into "edible landscape" by planting things that are both attractive and produce nuts, berries, and other edibles. You'll reduce your reliance on the globalized food system, which will lessen your personal share of the fossil fuels associated with the transport, storage, and marketing of supermarket food. And it will give you fresh, nutrient-packed food to boot! A great Earth Day activity is to learn more about edible landscapes and start making a plan. [See edible landscape books on Amazon.com.

(<http://www.grinningplanet.com/amazon/books/search/edible-landscapes.htm>)]

Do an Organic Vegetable Garden ★★

If edible landscape seems too daunting for you, spend Earth Day planting a "normal" vegetable garden. Just till up (or turn over) a patch of lawn, get some seeds and starter plants, and begin! Eventually, if you can grow a garden big enough, you may want to also learn about canning so the "August overload" of harvested veggies doesn't go to waste.

Create Backyard Habitat for Wildlife ★

Wild suburban critters can be more than just squirrels and a few types of birds. Part of your yard-conversion effort can aim at creating "backyard habitat" for a wide variety of birds, butterflies, frogs, and other cool creatures. See National Wildlife Federation's page on this for more info (<http://www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/>).

AVOIDING "PEAK FOOD"

Not only are vegetable gardens and edible landscapes a good idea for the earth and for your nutritional status, they're a good hedge against the coming problems in the food supply as we know it. Oil shortages and diversion of large amounts of staple crops like corn and soybeans to biofuels plants will combine to make supermarket food more expensive in the future. And that's the "good scenario." The bad scenario is that we see actual food shortages and the inevitable hoarding that goes with them. If the worst predictions of peak-oil chaos come to pass, we'll see a general collapse of the globalized food system. Starting to develop your own food supply is a reeeeeaaaally good idea. So is learning how to buy "local food," which we cover in the next section.

***Ensure Water for Wild Critters* ★**

Where do suburban animals get water? Is there a creek in your back yard? If not, consider adding a water feature as part of your yard overhaul. It will attract cool wild things and can add beauty to your yard.

There should be local practitioners skilled in the art of backyard water features that can help you plan and implement. Step one is to spend Earth Day...

- looking up info on backyard water features on the internet or finding books on water features on Amazon (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/amazon/books/search/water-features.htm>);
- thinking about what you'd like your water feature and the surrounding area to look like;
- setting a budget range; and
- finding the phone numbers for a water-feature company or two so you can call them during the week when they're open.

If you're not up for doing a major project, how about just a bird bath? If nothing else, put out a shallow pan of water! (*Related GP article: Fresh Water for Back Yard Animals* (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2004/05-11/backyard-bird-bath-animals-water-article.htm>))

More Earth Day Activities Related to Your Food

***Get a Plan Together to Buy Local Food* ★★**

Buying locally grown, in-season food greatly reduces the level of pollution-generating transportation associated with your food. Local food is generally fresher, too.

Farmers markets are a perfect way to buy local produce. While most of the farmers markets don't really get going until May or June, Earth Day is a good time to figure out where and when your local farmers markets will be.

CSAs (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/02-07/csas-community-supported-agriculture-article.htm>) are also a great way to get a constant supply of locally grown food, though by this time of year, most CSAs are fully subscribed. You can find farmers markets and CSAs in your area at LocalHarvest (<http://www.localharvest.org/>). You can also find locally grown meat and animal products using the Eat Well Guide (<http://www.eatwellguide.org/>).

***Increase the Amount of Organics in Your Diet* ★**

Chemical pesticides and fertilizers are big environmental problems, and the pesticide residues on conventional food aren't doing you and your family any good, either.

Pledging to spend more time shopping in the organic section of your supermarket is a great way to be eco-friendly and you-friendly at the same time. (Better yet, pledge to drop the supermarket altogether in favor of your local natural-foods market.) You can learn more about increasing the amount of organics in your diet at Organic Earth Day (<http://www.organicearthday.org/>).

Note: This Earth Day activity would get two stars except that the organics available in most US markets are shipped long distances, usually from California, and sometimes from overseas. If you can find *locally grown* organic food, award yourself a full three stars!

Earth Day Activities Related to Your Toiletries, Cleaning Products, etc

Change to Natural Cleaning Products ★

We won't try to argue that natural cleaning products are *more* effective than their chemical counterparts. They're not. But natural brands are *effective enough*, and that's all that should count on that score. More importantly, switching to natural cleaning products keeps chlorine and other toxics from contaminating the water supply---and you.

**AHH...
THE AIR IS FILLED WITH THE SMELLS OF
SPRING . . . AND DRYER SHEETS**

We wholeheartedly encourage you to get rid of your toxic chemical-based dryer sheets and fabric softeners. There are natural fabric softeners, but there are also ways to not use any fabric softeners or dryer sheets.
(<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2004/04-29/stop-static-cling-fabric-softener-article.htm>)

Consider making an Earth Day pledge to switch to natural versions of these products:

- laundry soap;
- fabric softener; (see sidebar)
- liquid dish soap and automatic dishwasher soap
- tub and tile cleaner
- toilet bowl cleaner
- drain cleaner (note: vinegar works well and is cheap!)
- floor cleaner, carpet cleaner
- dusting sprays, furniture polish

But don't bother trying to find them at Wal-Mart or your supermarket. Such stores carry few if any natural cleaning products. Seek out your nearest natural foods store, where shelves full of natural cleaning products, just waiting for you to find them. You can also find entire books on the subject of natural cleaning at Amazon (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/amazon/books/search/natural-cleaning.htm>), as well as many of the products themselves.

Change to Natural Personal Care Products ★

Even worse than contaminating your home with chemical cleaning products is contaminating *yourself* with directly applied chemical-based personal-care products. We think trying to primp and preen with products whose ingredients originated in a barrel of petroleum chemicals is ...um... inadvisable.

Natural versions of every basic personal care product now exist, and there are lots of high quality brands and varieties to choose from. They almost all work well, but you may have to try a few different brands before you settling on the ones you like best.

Make it one of your Earth Day activities to consult the personal care aisle at a natural foods store near you.

Earth Day Activities Out and About

***Help Out in a Stream Clean-Up* ★**

We all see the trash along highways and roads. The same sort of trash---and lots more--
-is in your local creeks and streams. Check with your county or city department of natural resources to see if there are Earth Day stream-cleanup efforts you can help with.

***Become a Watershed Monitor* ★★**

Pulling trash out of a stream is a good thing, but more important than the old tires and scrap 2x4s in the water are chemicals, "biologicals" from farm waste, and other types of pollution.

It's likely that your locality has a watershed monitoring program in which networks of volunteers take periodic water samples at various points in the watershed. Some training is required, so why not make one of your Earth Day activities figuring out how you can get involved? To find programs in your area of the US, see EPA's National Directory of Volunteer Monitoring Programs (<http://yosemite.epa.gov/water/volmon.nsf/VST?openview>). To learn more about the subject in general, see the US EPA's Overview of Watershed Monitoring section (<http://www.epa.gov/watertrain/monitoring/>). (*Note: Don't miss the "Next" button once you get there!*)

***Attend a Planned Earth Day Event* ★**

Lots of groups in the US and in countries all around the world host Earth Day events and activities. To find out what's happening near you, check out Earth Day Network's database of Earth Day events (<http://www.earthday.net/programs/find/searchevent.aspx>). *Important:* When you put in the info for your town and do a search, only Earth Day events *in your town* (if any) are shown. Earth Day activities in nearby towns don't automatically get listed, so be sure to do searches for all towns near you.

Earth Day Activities in Cyberspace

***Get Better News* ★★★**

Unplug from the corporate media and news talk shows, and move beyond the propaganda! Spend part of Earth Day figuring out your new approach to getting news about the environment and everything else. Daily online reading? MP3 downloads?

Whatever your preference, you can find lists of good news sources on these Grinning Planet pages:

- General News
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/5005/news-general.htm>
- Investigative News/Analysis
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/5005/news-investigative-analysis.htm>
- Environmental News
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/5005/news-environmental.htm>
- Talk Shows/Interviews
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/5005/news-talk-interviews.htm>

Related Grinning Planet articles:

- Corporate Media
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/update-2003-11-06/corporate-media-article.htm>
- News Talk Shows
<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2006/update-2003-11-04/news-talk-shows.htm>

***Get Political* ★**

We in the US like to think we live in a democracy, but it's really a plutocracy, (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/2004/09-07/plutocracy-democracy-capitalism-article.htm>) where powerful moneyed interests---particularly our biggest corporations---have figured out how to control the system to their best advantage. Because the system has become so corrupted, it's become very hard to continue making progress on environmental issues. Oh, sure, we see a lot of corporate press releases and hear a lot of politicians' statements about the good green things they *say* they're doing, but in reality, the bulk of the environmental progress in the US happened decades ago, and we've been in a holding pattern since then.

It's going to take a lot of push-back from the grassroots to change this, and we are all part of the grassroots. We at Grinning Planet are actually a bit pessimistic about how successful political reform can be, given the level of entrenchment of special interests, but we have to try. Start by letting your elected officials know how you feel about Earth-related issues by calling their offices and writing them emails or letters. You can find out who represents you at Project Vote Smart. (<http://www.vote-smart.org/>)

***Join a Green Group* ★★**

Joining an environmental group or two will help you stay abreast of the latest eco-issues and it will support the planet's eco-warriors in their fight to keep our planet's environment from spinning off its axis.

Here are some of our favorite green groups, in no particular order:

- Sierra Club
<http://www.sierraclub.com/>
- Union of Concerned Scientists (not just for scientists!)
<http://www.ucsusa.org/>
- Pesticide Action Network North America | Other Regions
<http://www.panna.org/>
<http://www.pan-international.org/>
- Natural Resources Defense Council
<http://www.nrdc.org/>
- Environmental Defense
<http://www.environmentaldefense.org/home.cfm>

- Post Carbon Institute
<http://www.postcarbon.org/>
- Greenpeace
<http://www.greenpeace.org/international/>
- Population Connection
<http://www.populationconnection.org/>
- Organic Farming Research Foundation
<http://ofrf.org/>
- League of Conservation Voters
<http://www.lcv.org/>
- Environmental Working Group
<http://www.ewg.org/>

Stay Plugged In; Spread the Word! ★★★★★★★★★★

Thanks for reading this article, and thanks for taking action on Earth Day.

If you know someone who might like this article on Earth Day activities, please forward it to them. And if you're not already signed up for Grinning Planet's free email service (<http://www.grinningplanet.com/5001/signup.htm>), doing so will ensure that you get more great information in the future!