

going green

in the New Year

12 steps for reducing your family's carbon footprint in 2009

By Sharon Trotter-Martin
The Register-Mail

Looking for a New Year's resolution that has nothing to do with scales, calories, or 5 a.m. trips to the gym?

January is the perfect time for you and your family to turn over a new leaf — specifically, a new green leaf. Whether it's turning down your thermostat a few degrees, planting a garden or walking to work a few days a week instead of driving, everyone can make a few simple changes to help the environment.

At times, the problems caused by global warming can seem so enormous that it's difficult to understand how one individual's behavior can make a difference. But, according to Peter Schwartzman, Chair of the Department of Environmental Studies at Knox College, whether or not a person chooses, for example, to recycle really does matter.

"It matters because it affects me and my family and the birds and the bees as well," Schwartzman said. "If more people recycled aluminum, much less of the earth would have to be excavated and much less energy would have to be used to make new aluminum."

Schwartzman has written numerous articles on the environment. He is a board member for WING (Western Illinois Nature Group) and established The Center in Galesburg, a forum in which residents work collectively in hopes of developing more humane, healthy and sustaining ways to live together.

Living unsustainably makes the planet less livable for the future, he said, and causes unnecessary suffering; the release of poisons, the wasting of money, the tainting and compromising of food quality, and the trampling of habitats. "Our happiness doesn't require that we destroy the planet," he said.

So, what can one person do to make a difference?

"Every day, each of us makes hundreds of decisions that impact the planet in either positive or negative ways," Schwartzman said. These decisions include everything from buying bottled water or bringing one's own to throwing away junk mail in the trash or putting it in a recycling bin.

"We can make 100 environmentally-preferred choices every day or we can make one. It is our decision. It sounds like a burden but it gets easy after a while," he said. "You stop using bleach altogether; you walk to the gym rather than drive, you buy second-hand clothes rather than new ones, you get used to five-year-old furniture."

Many green decisions, such as growing a garden and saving energy, don't just help save the earth, they also help save money. Additionally, parents who go green have the added benefit of modeling responsible and civic-minded behavior for their children.

Helping kids cultivate green habits can begin with simple steps, such as teaching them to turn off the tap when brushing their teeth, which, according to National Geographic, can save up to 50 gallons of water a week.

Whether you're looking to take your first green steps or to add to the sustainable practices you started years ago, the list below offers green ideas for individuals and families. Choose to do one of them or all 12 — every little bit helps.

A greener workplace

Water filters, organic cotton, and local lumber among Knoxville company's efforts

By Sharon Trotter-Martin
The Register-Mail

It's possible to implement green practices, both big and small, at work, too. Visit Trillium Dell Timberworks' Web site, for example, and you will find the word "Sustainability" on its homepage, along with "Inspiration" and "Craftsmanship."

For owners Laura and Rick Collins, who build custom timber homes and do historic restoration for their Knoxville business, sustainability is part of their guiding philosophy.

When you build a large timber structure, it has a longer life cycle than a conventional home," said Laura.

Though the Collinses are willing to use whatever materials their clients prefer, Laura explained that many homebuilders want to use local resources, a practice that she and her husband appreciate.

"Some clients even use trees from their own property," Laura said. "How different is that from farm-steading 100 years ago, when people would have used what's available?"

Using local resources and lumber is an environmentally-friendly practice because it minimizes the fuel and handling involved in transporting lumber from far away states such as Georgia.

"Certainly, the most sustainable building practice would be to put the energy into a sound existing structure," Laura said.

An example of the kind of restoration or adaptive re-use that Trillium De does, Laura said, would be taking down a barn that a farmer no longer uses "and taking it to a park where it might serve as a living history museum of agriculture in the 1800s in Illinois."

Both Laura and Rick grew up with an environmentally-friendly sensibility. Laura's parents composted and recycled, and Rick helped his parents restore old homes that they would turn into rental properties.

Like for many business owners, adopting green practices has been a work in progress for the Collinses during the 10 years that Trillium Dell has been open.

Recent changes have included switching from bottled water to inline filters at work, along with printing brochures on recycled paper and using T-shirts made of organic cotton for PR. And, of course, they recycle, contracting with Eagle Enterprises Recycling from Galva.

Still, Laura acknowledged, there is always room for improvement.

"I'm still a consumer," she said. "But I'm trying to be a conscious consumer."

www.trilliumdell.com

Going green isn't just something that individuals can do at home and in their personal lives.