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Good mileage, safety often don't ride together

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

When your green tendencies collide with reality, you've got an eco-dilemma on your hands.

Cars provide a literal example. Many of the greenest cars might not fare so well in a collision. Especially if you have a family, or a teenager behind the wheel, when you buy a car it makes sense that your first priority will be the latest safety features, rather than great gas mileage. But you don't want to blow off the environment either. It's a tough choice, but you may be able to drive your way out of it.

Parallel streets

Or don't drive — take the bus instead. But the fact is most of us still have cars. And when you investigate green cars, you rarely find any references to safety. Conversely, articles about the safest cars usually have nothing to say about gas mileage. Apparently the car reviewers and environmental experts have blinders on.



COURTESY OF THE INSURACEN INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY
Honda Accord



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Saturn VUE

So if you want to go green and safe in your ride, you need to do your own parallel research. It may be time-consuming and frustrating, but it's well worth it. After all, how often do you buy a car?

Information fill-up

Auto safety continues to evolve, but experts now recommend you look for these safety features in new or used cars:

- Side-curtain airbags for all rows of seats.
- Electronic stability control.
- Crashworthiness (high crash-test scores).

Get up to speed by exploring the rankings and tips for safe cars from the U.S. Department of Transportation (www.safercar.gov), Edmunds Car Safety Guide (www.edmunds.com/safety), and Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (www.iihs.org.)

For the nuts and bolts on green cars, go to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Green Vehicle Guide (www.epa.gov/greenvehicles), the U.S. Department of Energy's listings (www.fueleconomy.gov), Edmunds Green Car Guide (www.edmunds.com/fueleconomy) and Consumer Reports' Greener Choices (www.greenerchoices.org).

With diligent research, you can find a car that goes both ways.

The road ahead

Small light cars with impressive gas mileage often perform poorly in crash tests, so if you opt for a subcompact be both aware of the safety tradeoff and doubly careful to pick among the most crashworthy cars within the weight class and to buy all safety options.



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2008 Toyota Prius

As with anything else, buying used instead of new conserves resources. With luck, you can sometimes find a used car with exactly the optional safety features you desire.

Going down the road safe and green at the same time needs to get easier. In purchasing decisions, a car's environmental impact should share equal billing with safety, durability, attractiveness and price.

Ultimately, public demand will drive this, showing that the environment doesn't have to take a back seat.

Tom Watson, with King County Recycling and Environmental Services, writes the EcoConsumer column in The Seattle Times NW Home&Life section on Saturdays. He and his wife, Linda, recently bought a 2005 Toyota Corolla, which their 16-year-old daughter Genna drives. It has side airbags and electronic stability control. Reach Tom at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com.