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Living green in the living room

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

This is the fourth feature in an occasional series on simple ways to green your home, room-by-room. Today, we focus on the living room.

The road to green living runs directly through your living room.

Green home makeovers commonly start in the kitchen or bathroom, focusing on appliances and water usage. But since the living room is often the largest room in the home, where we spend countless hours reading, watching TV or socializing, it could certainly stand a spruce-up to make it healthier and greener.

Follow this guide to easy steps you can take over a weekend to turn your living room into a prime-time example of eco-living.

Called on the carpet

A big room, especially with wall-to-wall carpeting, provides plenty of



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Resources

Healthy Child Healthy World: www.healthychild.org/resources/checklist

places for dust to hide. To reduce tracked-in dust and pollutants in your carpet and rugs, place a large doormat in the entranceway and encourage people to take off their shoes.

Combat dust mites by vacuuming twice or more each week. If members of your household have dust sensitivities, you should buy a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter, suggests the California-based nonprofit Healthy Child Healthy World. HEPA vacuums run from about \$200 to more than \$800.

Greener cleaners

Cleaning products for carpets may contain toxic or flammable ingredients. But for many stains on carpets, rugs and upholstery, you don't need to bring out the big guns. The Internet offers numerous recipes for alternative cleaners, with ingredients such as Castile soap (made with vegetable oil), cornstarch or vinegar.

Also consider phasing out your standard furniture polishes, which are often petroleum-based. Many alternative cleaning Web sites recommend making your own furniture polish by combining olive oil with lemon juice or vinegar.

Clear the air

It's tempting to grab a can or a plug-in air freshener and make your living room smell like "Hawaiian Breeze" or "Lavender Meadows." About 75 percent of U.S. households use air fresheners, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). But because they may contain a bouquet of toxics, do the environment and your family's health a favor and give air fresheners the boot.

A 2007 NRDC study found that 12 of 14 tested brands of common household air fresheners contained phthalates, chemicals linked to hormone disruption and birth defects. NRDC and other environmental groups have asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to require testing of air fresheners, but the EPA has declined.

Alternative cleaner recipes: www.ecocycle.org/hazwaste/recipes.cfm

Household Products Database: hpd.nlm.nih.gov

TV digital switch and recycling info: www.takeitbacknetwork.org

Find the right energy-saving bulb: www.edf.org/page.cfm?tagid=632

Manufacturers don't even have to reveal the ingredients in air fresheners. Some companies have provided ingredient information, listed in the federal Household Products Database, but it's not very reassuring. For example, more than a dozen Glade aerosol air fresheners have the highest possible rating, "severe," for flammability. As an alternative to air fresheners, try real or dried flowers, or just open the window.

A stake through the heart

Televisions, sound systems and related electronics in the living room may be sucking your electricity with standby or "vampire" power. That refers to the energy used even when an electronics device is turned off.

To slay your vampires — and save \$15 or more a year in energy costs — consider a "smart" power strip that will automatically shut off power to connected equipment when not in use. You can find these at Ecohaus in Seattle and other local stores or online for \$30 and up.

An even larger environmental monster may be lurking in your living room: the national digital-TV switch that will take place in February. Just remember that you don't need to get rid of your old TV. Even if you don't have cable or satellite TV, you can buy a converter box for about \$20, using a discount available from the federal government. And if you choose to get a new TV set, you must recycle your old one. They can't go in the garbage in King, Snohomish or Kitsap counties.

Frugal furniture

If you buy living-room furniture new, you're missing a chance to save money and reduce waste. It's never been easier to find high-quality, secondhand furniture through online or newspaper classified ads or at used furniture, consignment or thrift stores. Chances are no one will even realize it isn't new, unless you brag about the great deal you got.

Lighten up

You can also save some bucks in the living room by switching to energy-efficient compact-fluorescent lamps (CFLs), including new 3-way and dimmable CFLs. But choose your bulbs carefully, using Internet research and recommendations from friends, since some

CFLs may not work well for certain types of lamps or fixtures.

Thinking big

When it's time to make mega-changes in the living room, go green for the whole nine yards. Use paint with low VOCs (volatile organic compounds), consider pulling out the carpet and install a ceiling fan to reduce heating and cooling costs. After all, there's no better place to enjoy green living than in your own living room.

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