



Saturday, March 8, 2008 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Don't overlook the bathroom as you turn the home green

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

This is the second feature in an occasional series on simple ways to green your home, room by room.

It may be one of the smallest rooms in your home, but the bathroom offers myriad ways to reduce your environmental impact. So don't flush those opportunities down the drain. Here are some ideas for a quick weekend green-up.

Shower showdown

Pop in the shower first, and take a look at your shower curtain. Yikes! If it has mold or grunge (we've all been there), you need to clean it or replace it. Several cleaning-tip Web sites

recommend tossing your shower curtain in the washing machine with a couple towels, using detergent and a little bleach. But don't put it in the dryer; let it drip dry.

Most shower curtains are made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), a plastic that can emit toxics into the environment, especially during production. When you need a new shower curtain, consider a greener, chlorine-free material called polyethylene vinyl acetate (PEVA or EVA).



Gabi Campanario / The Seattle Times

As part of a toxics-reduction effort, Target currently offers shower curtains and liners made from EVA as well as cloth and is working to achieve a nearly 90 percent non-PVC level in its own brands by spring, according to Target spokesman Joshua Thomas.

You can also reduce your water use by installing a low-flow showerhead.

Most newer showerheads have a rated flow of 2.5 gallons per minute (gpm), but for less than \$20 you can find a showerhead rated at 1.75 gpm or lower. Choose a model with a shut-off valve above the showerhead, which reduces water flow to a dribble while lathering.

Many shampoos, soaps and other cosmetics contain questionable chemicals. To check out yours, consult the "Skin Deep" online cosmetics safety database (www.cosmeticsdatabase.com), maintained by the nonprofit Environmental Working Group. It lists more than 27,000 products.

Sink savings

To complement your new showerhead, install a low-flow aerator on the end of the faucet in your sink. If your current aerator has a flow of 2 gpm or more (it's imprinted on the aerator), save money on your water bill with a 1 gpm aerator, which costs under \$10. And never ignore a drippy faucet. At one drop a second, that drip-drip-drip can waste 2,700 gallons of water a year, says the GreenHome Guide.

Also save some green by cleaning your mirror without chemicals. Real Simple magazine suggests using plain water and a washable microfiber cleaning cloth, available online and at many local stores.

Toilet talk

As the most important seat in the house, the toilet must be kept clean. But you don't need heavy-duty cleaners. Try a basic non-chlorine scouring powder such as the inexpensive Bon Ami brand, which also works well for cleaning the bathtub. And don't waste your money on toilet bowl brushes with "disposable" or "flushable" heads. An old-fashioned reusable toilet bowl brush works just fine.

Keep in mind that King County Wastewater Treatment Division recommends against flushing anything (even products labeled flushable) down the toilet except bodily wastes and toilet paper.

You can also green your toilet paper by buying brands with recycled content, such as Seventh Generation or Green Forest. If every U.S. household replaced just one roll of virgin-fiber toilet paper with 100-percent

recycled toilet paper, we could save 424,000 trees, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

If your water bill seems surprisingly high, you may have a leaky toilet, which can waste up to 600 gallons of water a month. Internet resources can help you find and fix a leak.

Recycle in here, too

Place a small recycling container in the cabinet under the sink, or somewhere else out of the way. You probably generate more recyclables than you realize in the bathroom, including plastic bottles, cardboard packaging and toilet-paper cores.

Ideal lighting

Compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) work well in the bathroom. For recessed fixtures, choose bulbs labeled for that usage. High humidity can sometimes shorten the life of CFLs, so remember to run the fan during showers and baths (a good idea in general to avoid moisture problems).

Towel time

To complete your weekend green-bathroom makeover, consider organic cotton towels, now widely available on the Internet and at a few local stores, such as Goods for the Planet. Most cotton farming relies heavily on pesticides, so your towels can help lessen that load. You can also find towels made from bamboo, considered a green material because it usually is grown without pesticides. However, bamboo processing often involves caustic chemicals, so those towels may not be quite so green after all.

Long-term projects

Considering a bathroom remodel in the future? Go for the green. A dual-flush toilet, tubular skylight or tiles made from recycled materials could make your bathroom an eco-friendly palace. After all, it already has the throne.

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