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## Questions to ask before buying a supposedly "green" product

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

How many "green" products will it take to stop global warming?

If you answered, "as few as possible," you're on the right track. We can't buy our way to a greener world. It takes behavioral change, which often involves buying fewer products, not more. Every product has an environmental cost, from processing to transportation to disposal.

That doesn't mean we should spurn all of the thousands of green products now flooding the marketplace. But before you buy a product trumpeted as eco-friendly, ask yourself these questions:

- Is it less wasteful or less toxic than a product you use regularly? Those types of products — such as recycled-content toilet paper, organic food or a front-loading washing machine — are often the most effective at reducing our environmental impact.



- Do you really need it? Sales of "natural" household cleaning products have soared, increasing 26 percent in the past year, according to industry research. But many of those products are superfluous, since cleaning jobs can often be handled with nontoxic ingredients you already have around the house, such as vinegar or baking soda.

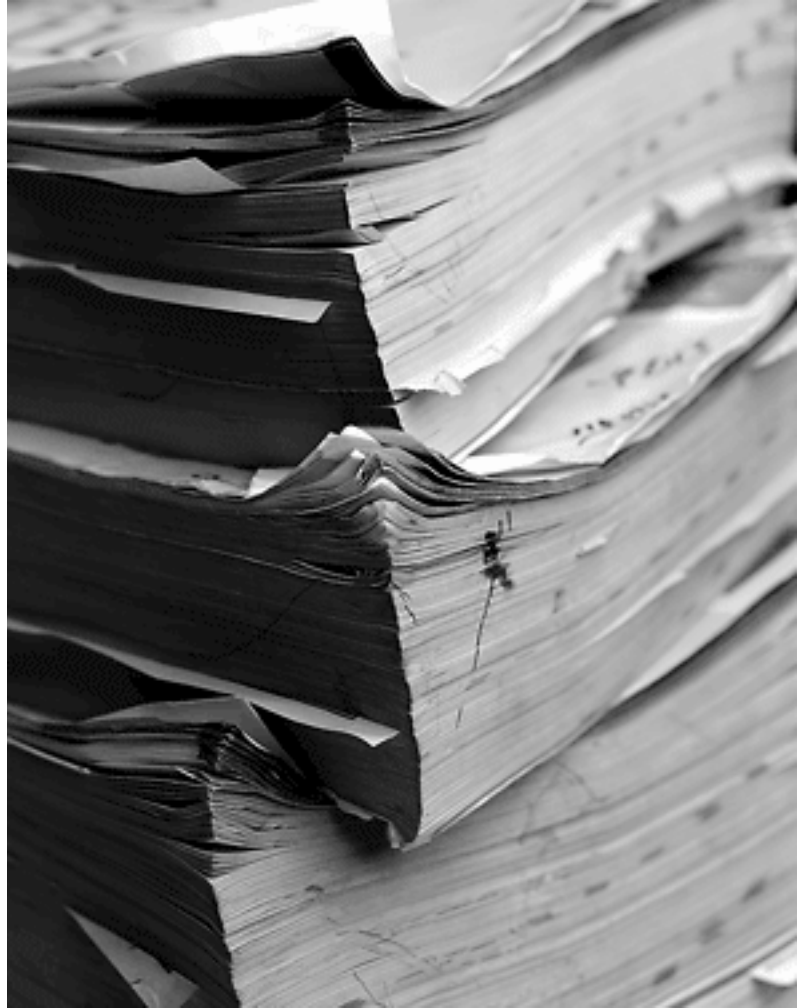
- Can you change your lifestyle or habits instead of buying a product? For example, instead of purchasing a hybrid car, perhaps you could take the bus, bike or walk to work, move closer to your job or join a car-sharing program.

- Will it make a green behavioral change easier? If having a great pair of walking shoes helps you walk more instead of driving, then those shoes make a green contribution, even if they're not made from recycled materials.

As we celebrate Earth Day this month, the marketing of green products has reached a fever pitch. Here are a few examples of products that can truly call themselves green:

### **Get into hot water**

For a hot green investment, consider a solar water heater. Despite our rainy, cloudy reputation, Western Washington works surprisingly well for this.



And by reducing the costs of heating water, a solar hot-water system will pay for itself in 6 to 12 years, says Larry Owens, president of the nonprofit Shoreline Solar Project.

To make it even more inviting, you don't have to pay Washington state sales tax on solar water-heating equipment, and you can get a federal tax credit until the end of this year.

### **On the rack**

A clothes dryer typically uses the most electricity of any appliance other than the refrigerator. Hang clothes outside on a line or rack when you can.

But although we have may enough sun for solar energy, if you want to regularly hang your clothes to dry them, you will need an indoor clothes-drying rack. Visit Bed Bath & Beyond or other local housewares stores, or search online for "wood clothes-drying racks" to find models for \$10 and up.

### **Eat a peach**

Of all the fruits and vegetables at the grocery store, peaches usually contain the highest levels of pesticides, according to the Environmental Working Group ([www.foodnews.org](http://www.foodnews.org)). So this summer, when they're ripe, seek out Washington-grown organic peaches at neighborhood farmers markets, Pike Place Market or your local grocery.

### **Calling all greens**

The price is right for this last product — no charge, and waste-free as well. As phone-directory publishers start to make it easier to opt out of receiving paper phone books, you can finally find online phone directories



that are up-to-date and easy to use, once you get the hang of them.

For example, the Dex Electronic Directory ([www.dexpages.com](http://www.dexpages.com)) shows pages just like the print version. So let your fingers do the walking — right across your keyboard.

### **A brand new bag**

This is one of the few regions in the country where most residents can put food scraps in with their yard waste. It then gets picked up and turned into compost products sold at area stores.

To conveniently collect food waste in your kitchen, first get a container (from your city or online, or reuse a container), and then line it with an approved compostable bag. See [www.recyclefood.com](http://www.recyclefood.com) for an extensive list of stores in King County that sell these bags. Be sure you get the right size bag — about 2.5 gallons. Tossing the whole bag in the yard waste makes food-waste collection much easier.

### **From bike to package**

For those who would ride in the city if they could safely store their bike in a small space or easily transport it, a folding bike may provide the solution.

Folding Bikes West ([www.electricvehiclesnw.com/fbw](http://www.electricvehiclesnw.com/fbw)) in Ballard offers several models (most pedal-powered, but one electric) that fold up in 30 seconds into a compact 25-pound package. Priced at \$400 and up, they're still much cheaper and greener than a car.

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