

The Seattle Times

Saturday, December 19, 2009 - Page updated at 01:31 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Cool ideas for keeping winter warm, safe and green

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Anything looks good in green. Even winter.

The blizzard of new green resources and products the past few years makes it easier to reduce our environmental impact all year around, even during the harshest season. So bundle up, and we'll consider some cool seasonal ways to go green when we step outside the comforts of home.

Q: Speaking of bundling up, aren't there lots of eco-friendly choices now for winter jackets and accessories?

A: Definitely. Sustainable fabrics are actually used more in outdoor winter garments than in most other types of clothing.

In the early 1990s, outdoor-wear retailer Patagonia pioneered the manufacture of fleece using recycled polyester from plastic soda bottles. Many stores or online retailers now carry recycled fleece jackets, vests, pants, hats, gloves, scarves, ear warmers and even dog coats. REI alone offers more than 50 winter garments and accessories made with recycled fleece.

Buying fleece or other products made from plastic bottles is one of the best ways to support plastic recycling. Recycled fleece clothes tend to be higher-end products, but usually don't cost much more than fleece clothes of comparable quality made with "virgin" polyester.

Q: What about other winter products?

A: You can now find a variety of winter recreation equipment including skis, snowboards and snowshoes made with greener materials, and a prime example is produced right here in Washington state. Mervin Manufacturing near Sequim, which describes itself as the only major snowboard factory left in the U.S., has blazed a green trail by reducing the use of toxic lacquers and resins.

Q: I always have a problem with ice and snow on my walkways. Is it OK to use salt to melt the ice?

A: Rock salt, or sodium chloride, can kill vegetation, harm pets' paws and pollute local waterways. Instead consider products with magnesium chloride, a less-corrosive but still-effective ice melter.

Other products billed as eco-friendly may also do the job, but some have questionable ingredients so check the Internet for reviews and details. Though most alternatives to rock salt will cost more, they might be worth it, especially if you have pets. You also could use sand, a low-cost, safer alternative that won't melt the ice but will improve traction on your walkways.

Q: I like being greener and healthier by riding my bike or walking to work in the winter, but I've had some close calls with cars. How can I stay safe?

A: Anyone who walks or bikes around here this time of year will be in the dark sometimes, so your best safety policy is to light yourself up like a Christmas tree. Dozens of flashy new bike lights and blinkers are now available, including energy-efficient, rechargeable and even solar versions.

Wearing bright clothes also greatly improves your visibility, even in daytime. Countless accident reports of pedestrians hit by cars

include the same somber statement: "Victim was wearing dark-colored clothing."

Q: When I do drive, how long should I warm up the car on a cold day?

A: No matter how frigid it gets, you usually don't need to run your car longer than 30 seconds before you drive off. Scrape the ice off the windows before you start the car to avoid excessive idling.

If it's snowy or icy, why not avoid the tribulations of winter driving and take the bus or light rail? King County Metro Transit (www.kingcounty.gov/metro) recently revamped its Transit Alerts system to help riders cope with winter storms.

Q: I feel greener and warmer already. On another note, do you ever run corrections or updates of past EcoConsumer columns?

A: Yes, and here's one: Responding to the last column, several readers pointed out that you don't need a paid subscription for Consumer Reports, because local libraries carry it. You can even read it for free online from anywhere through many library Web sites, if you have a library card. Thanks for the reminder!

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com

Copyright © The Seattle Times Company