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EcoConsumer

Eco-tastic ideas for the new year

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By Tom Watson

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Q: Let's start with energy. What's hot?

A: Breakthroughs in energy conservation and usage have kept the environmental movement humming in the 21st century. Consider these in the coming year:

- **Change the channel.** It's getting easier to buy a TV that's not an energy hog. By next summer, every new television will have a federally required label allowing shoppers to easily compare its energy efficiency with that of other models.
- **Prove sun skeptics wrong.** Yes, solar energy does work in Seattle, and residential applications have become more affordable and available. Resourceful nonprofit efforts, such as the Solarize Seattle program (solarizeseattle.org), which coordinates bulk purchases of solar panels, will bring sun power to the masses one neighborhood at a time.
- **Know your own power.** "Knowledge is power" was never more true than with home energy conservation. Dozens of new resources and programs help measure home energy use and show you how to conserve, including Microsoft-Hohm.com, google.com/powermeter and EnergySavvy.com.
- **Go electric from CA to BC.** Nissan's Leaf, the first mainstream all-electric car, arrived in Seattle in December. By the end of 2011, owners of the Leaf and other plug-in electric vehicles should have charging stations available along Interstate 5 from British Columbia to the Oregon-California border (the "Electric Highway"). More than 100 public charging stations will be installed in King County this year.
- **Reinvent your ride.** From fuel-efficient vehicles to biking to mass transit, green transportation alternatives keep coming. RelayRides (relayrides.com), a Google-financed business recently launched in Boston and San Francisco, lets people borrow cars from car owners in their neighborhood by the hour or the day. This type of "person-to-person" car-sharing program will likely arrive here soon, complementing existing sharing options such as Zipcar (zipcar.com).

Q: How about reducing toxins in our water, land and food?

A: That's another huge green growth area, so check out these strategies in 2011:

- **Money talks, organic waste walks.** Now that so much of the yard and food waste in our region gets collected for composting, we need to actually use more compost to keep the market strong for all that collected organic material. When you spread compost at home, or your employer purchases it for large projects, that reduces the need for chemical fertilizers and water.

- **Rethink fertilizer.** Synthetic chemical fertilizers can pollute our waterways. A proposed bill in the Washington state Legislature would restrict the use of potentially harmful phosphorus in lawn fertilizers. Get ahead of the game by switching to organic fertilizers this year.

- **Pop it green.** Microwave popcorn bags may contain questionable chemicals, so make your own microwave popcorn in a brown paper lunch bag. Search online for "homemade microwave popcorn" to learn how easy it is. You'll save money too.

- **Appreciate the cornucopia.** Help keep our dozens of distinctive local farmers markets strong. Use your wallet to support existing farmers markets and exciting new versions, including floating markets (farmer vendors on boats at a pier) and indoor farmers markets.

Q: We can't forget waste prevention. What's new on that front?

A: Creative waste-cutting efforts have mushroomed. Here are two ideas to get you thinking:

- **Revive the forgotten R.** In the mantra "Reduce, reuse, recycle," reuse often gets short shrift. Support reuse by donating your old laptop computer and other electronics to InterConnection (interconnection.org), a Seattle nonprofit that provides job training locally and distributes refurbished computers globally.

- **Invite innovation.** Computers really can reduce paper waste. Greenvelope (greenvelope.com), a new business started by a local teenager, provides beautiful online wedding invitations and "save-the-date" notices.

These 11 ideas for 2011 provide a jumping-off point, but the opportunities for greening our world and enhancing our quality of life have no bounds. Enjoy a green, rewarding new year!

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