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EcoConsumer

Shoe repair can be a green strategy

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By Tom Watson

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As products have gotten less expensive and more disposable, many traditional repair industries have withered away. Against all odds, shoe repair has retained a tenuous foothold.

More than 50 shoe-repair shops in the Seattle area keep the cobbler's craft alive, illustrating that repair can still be a green, economical strategy for consumers.

Q: Why has shoe repair proved more durable than, say, small-appliance repair?

A: Although the demand for shoe repair has declined, a relatively small number of dedicated and stubborn craftspeople continue to fix shoes, supported by a loyal cadre of customers.

Shoes are more personal and less technological than small appliances and other electronics, so that may help. The economic slump over the past few years has also given shoe repair a boost, since fixing shoes instead of buying new ones saves money.

Q: Before you even think about shoe repair, isn't the purchase of quality shoes the first step?

A: Definitely. Leather and other natural materials allow your feet to breathe and are generally more durable than synthetic materials, and sustainably produced leather is becoming more common. Solid construction of shoes also plays a vital role in durability and comfort.

When buying a pair of shoes, ask how long they are expected to last and whether the soles and heels are easily repairable. Cheap shoes may be nearly impossible to repair.

Q: It seems easier to just buy new shoes. Why should I bother with shoe repair?

A: Getting shoes fixed can actually take less time and be less of a hassle than finding a new pair of shoes and breaking them in. You can also save big bucks. Shoe repair might cost \$60 as opposed to spending \$150 for new shoes. When you have shoes you love, it just makes sense to extend their life as long as possible.

Q: My shoe-repair experiences have been mixed. Any tips?

A: Many shoe-repair professionals have been doing this work for decades. They can be fiercely individualistic, if not downright cranky. There's no excuse for rudeness, of course, but they often have legitimate reasons if they turn down a repair request or if it takes them a long time to finish a job.

You'll have the best results if you develop a relationship with your neighborhood shoe-repair shop, but if you're not happy with its service, try other shops. The Shoe Service Institute of

America, a national industry association, provides an online store locator (www.ssia.info) where you can search by city or ZIP code.

Customer-review websites such as Yelp (www.yelp.com) offer reviews of many Seattle-area shoe-repair businesses.

Shoe-repair services are surprisingly diverse. These shops can fix or replace women's and men's heels, soles, eyelets and straps, and they can stretch, waterproof or dye shoes. Your local shoe-repair shop may also mend or alter purses, luggage and belts.

Q: What about fixing my shoes myself?

A: This might be feasible in some cases, such as gluing a separated leather sole. But tread carefully with repair at home, since you can easily ruin your shoes. Find advice online by searching for "do it yourself" shoe repair.

Q: Any other steps I can take so my shoes will last longer?

A: Proper care and maintenance of shoes requires more than just occasional polishing. Consider specialized products such as a pre-polish conditioner for dress shoes or work boots, or "sneaker shampoo" for athletic shoes.

Don't wear the same shoes every day. Alternating several pairs gives shoes a chance to air out and is better for your shoes and feet. To help shoes keep their shape when you're not wearing them, use a cedar "shoe tree" or stuff them with paper. Store shoes in a breathable bag or box to protect them from dust.

So if the green shoe fits, wear it. And if the shoe splits, repair it!

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