

## Columnists

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EcoConsumer

### Green strategies come out in wash

Doing laundry may be a thankless task, but we can still look on the bright, clean and green side. The never-ending chore of washing our clothes offers a whole laundry basket full of opportunities to reduce our environmental footprint and save money.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Doing laundry may be a thankless task, but we can still look on the bright, clean and green side. The never-ending chore of washing our clothes offers a whole laundry basket full of opportunities to reduce our environmental footprint and save money.

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**Q:** Is the ecological impact really that significant?

**A:** An average American household spins through nearly 400 loads of laundry a year, consuming 9,700 gallons of water and 2,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity for washing and drying.

If Americans converted to efficient front-loading washing machines, used only cold water and hung clothes out to dry half the time, that would reduce energy consumption enough to close 23 coal-fired power plants nationwide, according to Duke University research. In addition, water consumption for home laundry would decrease 60 percent.

The production, use and packaging of countless laundry products such as detergent, bleach and dryer sheets take a toll as well. More than \$9 billion worth of those products were sold in the U.S. in 2010.

**Q:** Greening up our home laundry routine sounds great, but where do we begin?

**A:** First figure out your laundry requirements. Is a fragrance desired in your washed items? What are your laundry challenges, such as clothes with hard-to-remove stains or odors? How white do your clothes need to be?

Then experiment with various green, money-saving laundry strategies, including the use of fewer and less-toxic laundry products.

A great way to start is by increasing your cold-water washing, since heating the water accounts for nearly 90 percent of the cost of operating the washer. Some people successfully wash all loads in cold water, while others use cold water for everything except towels, sheets and the dirtiest clothes.

**Q:** Do I need a new washing machine?

**A:** Technological improvements have greatly improved washer efficiency, so consider replacing your washer if it is more than 10 years old. Choose a model with the federal Energy Star ([energystar.gov](http://energystar.gov)) efficiency label. Front-loading units generally deliver the highest savings on water and energy bills, although some top-loaders now have Energy Star certification as well.

**Q:** Are there any downsides to front-loading washers?

**A:** You will typically pay several hundred dollars more for a front-loader than for an inefficient top-loader, but you should make up that difference within a few years through reduced utility bills. Many Puget Sound-area residents qualify for rebates on efficient washers through the utility-sponsored WashWise program ([washwiserebate.com](http://washwiserebate.com)).

One common complaint about front-loaders is a musty or moldy smell. To help prevent that problem, keep the washer door slightly open when not in use, for ventilation.

**Q:** How about some detergent tips?

**A:** Because Western Washington has extremely "soft" water, which means low concentrations of minerals, you usually need to use only half the recommended amount of laundry detergent to get good results. Always buy highly concentrated detergent, which saves money and reduces packaging waste.

**Q:** We've cycled through all my washing questions, but what about drying?

**A:** Dryers account for a whopping 70 percent of all electricity used for home laundry. Drying clothes on a line or rack is the solution, but obviously that presents challenges for Seattle residents. String up a sturdy clothesline outdoors and hang up laundry early in the day if the forecast does not include rain. Outdoor drying is worthwhile even when the high is only in the 40s.

For your inevitable indoor drying, you can find well-designed, attractive clothes-drying racks online or at local stores. Because of mold issues, don't hang clothes to dry in an unheated basement.

**Q:** What if I just never do laundry?

**A:** That may not work unless you live alone in a cave, but many folks wash their clothes more than necessary. Try wearing jeans three times before washing, and other pants and dresses at least twice.

When you do wash your clothes, strategies such as using cold water and line drying might even help them last longer. That's truly a silver (and green) lining.

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