

Columnists

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EcoConsumer

2012 wishes: easier recycling, less packaging

The gift-giving season is all wrapped up, but we still have the gift of a whole new year to look forward to. It's the perfect time to put together our 2012 green wish list. Let's examine a few of the environmental changes suggested by local consumers and readers in recent months.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

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Q: Since leftover medications are an environmental and public-safety problem when flushed or put in the garbage, when will we have convenient methods available for properly disposing of unwanted drugs?

A: A bill will be reintroduced in the state Legislature in 2012 that would make Washington the first state to require drug companies to provide funding for collection and safe disposal of unwanted medications. Drug manufacturers oppose this bill, which is supported by many law-enforcement officials and other groups. The concept of manufacturers paying for recycling or proper disposal is called product stewardship.

Currently, all Group Health pharmacies and some Bartell Drugs stores and police departments collect certain types of old medications. National take-back days have been held when people can bring unwanted drugs to additional police stations. But governments and retailers shouldn't have to bear the financial burden of this service, and it needs to be made more convenient. For more information, visit TakeBackYourMeds.org.

Q: Speaking of convenience and proper disposal, what about fluorescent light bulbs? We need easier ways to recycle those.

A: Compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) and fluorescent tubes need to be recycled because they contain mercury. Fortunately, help is on the way. In 2010 the Washington Legislature passed product-stewardship legislation for fluorescent-light recycling, which takes effect in January 2013. Lighting manufacturers are required to fund a statewide collection system but have not yet worked out the details.

In the meantime, find existing King County collection locations at seati.ms/v9Zs6R. A few retailers such as Bartell Drugs and McLendon Hardware currently accept CFLs for recycling at no charge. Tell retailers who don't take back fluorescents that you would like them to work with manufacturers to offer this service.

Q: Let's switch gears. When will consumers have more choices for electric vehicles?

A: In the past year, the Puget Sound area has become a national leader in providing electric-vehicle charging stations, but availability of the vehicles themselves has not kept pace. The Nissan Leaf, the first mainstream electric car, was introduced in Seattle a year ago and has received good reviews. However, many Leafs ordered locally have not yet been delivered, and it's still rare to see an electric car on the road.

General Motors has heavily promoted the Chevy Volt, its new plug-in hybrid electric car, but the Volt's marketing took a jolt recently when testing indicated its battery could catch fire after a crash. Despite that setback, electric vehicles will become more available in 2012, with Ford and Mitsubishi introducing new models.

Q: I'd love to have a year-round farmers market in my neighborhood. What are the chances?

A: Although Western Washington boasts more than 80 farmers markets, only a handful currently operate year-round, including the University District, Ballard, West Seattle and Pike Place farmers markets in Seattle.

Because many vendors at farmers markets now offer more than just seasonal produce, year-round markets make sense. If you would support a year-round farmers market in your community, be sure to let local market organizers and vendors know.

Q: Let's end with the nightmare after Christmas. Will we ever get a reprieve from all that hard-to-open, unrecyclable plastic packaging?

A: That clear, clamshell-type packaging commonly used for small products is often made from the potentially toxic plastic PVC, or polyvinyl chloride. A few manufacturers and retailers began reducing PVC packaging several years ago.

Some of those efforts have stalled, but giant toy maker Hasbro just announced a new PVC packaging phaseout. Tell companies they should make their packaging PVC-free, more recyclable and easier to open.

Keep the questions and comments coming, and have a green and gratifying new year!

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