

Homes & Real Estate

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Keep it green by making smart phone choices

The encouraging news for the planet is that smartphones are generally greener than they used to be, containing fewer toxic materials.

By Tom Watson

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Ecoconsumer

The eco-impact of those amazing little handheld computers we call smartphones depends on how we choose, use and reuse (or recycle) them.

Technically a mobile phone with a computer operating system, the smartphone has played a key role in American consumerism since about 2007, the year Apple introduced the first iPhone. More than 170 million Americans own smartphones today.

Phones with the Android operating system, or OS, now outnumber iPhone OS phones, with Microsoft's Windows OS phones a distant third. Among smartphone manufacturers, Apple and Samsung hold a total of 72 percent of the U.S. market.

The encouraging news for the planet is that smartphones are generally greener than they used to be, containing fewer toxic materials, for example. As individuals, we have more options now for making our smartphones even smarter environmentally.

Choosing

For your next smartphone, consider buying a refurbished phone to conserve resources and save money.

When you purchase a refurbished (also known as pre-owned) phone through a major cellular-service provider, you can be fairly confident the phone is as good as new. If you agree to a service contract or extension, you can sometimes get a recent-model refurbished phone such as an iPhone 5s at no charge, with no increase in your cellphone bill.

Among major smartphone manufacturers, Apple appears to be farthest along in making its phones greener, according to research by Greenpeace and others.

When researching and choosing a specific phone, consider its environmental attributes such as durability and battery life, in addition to other main criteria such as features and price.

Fairphone, a Dutch "social enterprise" company, makes an Android OS smartphone currently available only in Europe. With impressively high sustainability standards — including repairability, durability and consideration for all workers involved with production and mining of raw materials — Fairphone sets a ringing example for other smartphone manufacturers.

Using

Extend the life of your smartphone battery and conserve energy by using energy-saver modes and turning off functions you don't use. If you're new to a certain kind of phone, ask a friend who has the same phone for tips. They'll often know from experience.

Make your phone a greener machine by taking full advantage of available apps, which are applications designed specifically for smartphones and tablet computers. Most apps are now offered for both iPhone and Android OS, and sometimes for Windows phones as well.

Eco-oriented apps can help you drive less, save energy, find sustainable food, report environmental problems, learn about climate change impacts, find recycling locations and much more.

Free, practical and easy-to-use enviro apps, as recommended by green-minded local smartphone users, include: OneBusAway; iRecycle (recycling locations, from Earth911); King County Flood Warning; the city of Seattle's Find It, Fix It (to report potholes, illegal dumping and other concerns); Seafood Watch, from the Monterey Bay Aquarium; and GoodGuide (greener products), from UL, formerly Underwriters Laboratories.

Reusing/recycling

Never throw cellphones in the garbage. Find free phone-recycling locations and mail-in programs at ecyclewa.org, call2recycle.org or wdidw.com (the new mobile-friendly version of King County's "What Do I Do With...?" website).

If you do keep one old phone as a backup, and your smartphone breaks or you lose it, charge up your old phone and take it with you until you can get a new one. Even a phone without current cellular service can be used to call 911 for emergencies, under federal regulations.

Many cellphones collected for recycling, especially smartphones, get refurbished and reused, which saves more resources than recycling.

You can often sell your old smartphone for a decent price. Bellevue-based Movaluate (movaluate.com) provides a free online service that lets you instantly learn the average fair-market price for a specific smartphone. You can also embed Movaluate's price reports into Craigslist and eBay listings.

Although smartphones can be addictive and may raise privacy concerns, at their best these powerful little devices enhance our lives. But it's up to us to make sure that power in our hands is green power.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services, and EcoConsumer is his biweekly column. He can be reached at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-477-4481 or via KCecoconsumer.com.