

Earth friendly clothes washing

By Green Living Tips | Published 02/1/2010

Washing clothes - lessening laundry environmental impact (First published October 2007, update February 2010)

The days of the washing board are long gone and while modern appliances have made the chore of clothes washing somewhat easier, they've also encouraged excesses in terms of the amount of water we use, energy we consume and chemicals we release into the environment. Here are some tips to put an earth friendly edge on your clothes washing and will also help save you money!

Usual disclaimers apply - spot test where relevant.

Pre-wash treatments

There are all sorts of pre-wash potions to help shift stains. Aside from the toxic nature of the chemicals, they often come in elaborate packaging. A couple of greener and far cheaper alternatives you may wish to try:

- Spraying neat vinegar on deodorant and other stains on garments just prior to washing
- Apply a paste of baking soda and water onto stains, then wash
- For pre-soaking, try one tablespoon of Borax per gallon of water and allow soaking for 30 minutes.

Cold water

Given the efficiencies of modern washing machines and detergents, hot water is really not required in most cases. We've been washing in cold water for years and have rarely found the need to re-wash anything. When roughing it, I've even washed clothes in water so cold; ice had formed on the surface. In those sorts of extreme cases, you may need to dissolve or dilute the detergent with some warm water. By using cold water, you'll save on energy costs involved with heating (and the associated environmental impact) and help extend the life of your water heater.

Load size and water levels

Resist washing small amounts of clothing. If you do need to wash a small number of items, consider hand washing as it only takes a few minutes to do or adjust the water levels in your machine appropriately.

Detergents

Laundry detergents tend to contain complex chemical cocktails made up surfactants, builders, bleaches, colorants, optical brighteners, fragrances and solvent ingredients. Many components are synthesized from crude oil and while the brand may claim biodegradability, breakdown can take some time; creating a buildup in waterways. Toxic substances such as carcinogens and other compounds that are deadly to aquatic life can also be produced during the degrading process or through interaction with other chemicals.

Components such as colorants really aren't necessary - they are often just there to make them pleasing to the eye as you pour them out. Fragrances are of particular concern, as companies often aren't required to detail what these are comprised of.



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Just about every supermarket these days offers "earth friendly" detergents and usually you'll find they are quite a bit cheaper too due to the no-frills, low active chemical approach - yet they can be just as effective. The "extra cleaning power" you often see advertised for major brands usually means extra of the base chemicals, plus some other nasties thrown in; and the more is better approach really doesn't apply to the average household washing needs - you're just paying more for what is effectively only a by-product of marketing. When shopping for detergent, compare chemical percentages - even between the earth friendly brands. Less of X ingredient doesn't necessarily mean a poorer wash, but will likely mean less of a toll on the environment and your wallet.

In Australia, there's an estimated 500 million household wash loads consuming 120,000 tons of chemicals per year. While the brand we use at home couldn't be called totally green, the lower/lesser chemical formulation has proven effective and I didn't notice any negative effects in our blackwater recycling system. I figure that if frogs were happy to live in the pipes, then all was well, particularly given that frogs tend to be "coal mine canaries" in aquatic situations.

If everyone used a similar brand; annual laundry detergent chemical consumption would plummet to 4,000 tons according to the detergent company's web site. That's an incredible reduction in chemical waste to achieve the same washing results - and at far less cost to the consumer.

Another ingredient to watch for in washing detergents is phosphate. While a naturally occurring substance, if too much phosphate is present in a body of water, it can spark the growth of algal blooms, which can then have a suffocating or toxic effect on other aquatic life forms. Phosphate in laundry detergent really isn't necessary, so avoid it altogether if possible.

If you need a bit of extra punch to your wash in terms of bleaching, consider adding a 1/2-cup of lemon juice to the rinse cycle and hang clothes outside to dry. By the way, a teaspoon of lemon juice thrown into your wash can also help your clothes to smell fresher! Other more environmentally friendly alternatives to brightening are a half-cup of baking soda thrown into the wash, or half a cup of borax.

Another big issue with detergents is the elaborate packaging and amount of water in the product, so opt for concentrated products in recyclable packaging. There are also "uber-green" laundry detergents available that are entirely plant based, such as soapnuts - no synthetic chemicals; but expect to pay quite a bit more for those.

Wash cycles

Sometimes we wash our clothes for too long - extra energy is used, there's more wear and tear on the equipment (and clothes) and perhaps even extra water is wasted. Experiment with your wash settings, gradually cutting back on the cycle to find the sweet spot.

Greywater collection

Washing machines vary greatly in their water use - anything from 10 gallons per full load for a very efficient front loader to a massive 50 gallons per full load for an older top loading washing machine.



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Why not try to collect some of this water and put it on your garden? You can simply attach a hose to your water outlet and then pipe it outdoors as long as the run outdoors isn't on a steep incline. To make the job easier, for under a hundred dollars you can pick up a greywater (meaning water from the shower and laundry) diversion valve kit.

Probably the best bet is to contact your local water authority for more information on greywater recycling options if a hose trailing over your laundry floor or out the window doesn't appeal to you. You can also go the whole hog and have a full grey water recycling system installed along with an irrigation system. We had the next level - a blackwater recycling system that dealt with all our wastewater, including the toilet - it was a marvelous system. Note: don't use graywater or blackwater on vegetables and vary where you apply the water so that plants aren't overly inundated with nutrients.

Dryers

Here in Australia, line drying is still very popular, but it seems in many countries people turn first to the electric clothes dryer. These are incredibly electricity intensive, capable of drawing thousands of watts an hour. Reacquaint yourself with your washing line, or if you don't have one or your local home owners association has banned them, clothes horses are very cheap to buy. Even if you just air-dry a few items from each load, every little bit of energy saved counts.

There's certainly nothing quite like the fresh smell of clothes aired outside - unless your city's air is particularly bad of course. The additional benefit of open air-drying is that sunlight can help kill some forms of bacteria.

While clothes washing will always likely be an energy and water intensive exercise, by applying some or all of the tips above, you'll be able to greatly reduce the overall environmental impact of the chore; plus wind up with a few more bucks in your pocket for the effort!

Laundry balls?

You may have heard of laundry balls or discs as another way to get your clothes clean using less or no chemicals at all. Do they work? Some people swear by them, others say they are a waste of money. You might like to read a little more about laundry balls before you spend your hard-earned cash on them.

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