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# FamilyCircle

Good Reads

Special Report



## No More Trash! The Amazing Garbage-Free Family

By Marie Sherlock

Left to right: Marshall, Sarah (top), Abigail (bottom) and Laurie Cohen, Laurie checks energy-saving lights; Abigail and Sarah load the dishwasher full before running it; Laurie holds a week's trash—the other bags contain recyclables.

**I**t's garbage pickup day in the Berwick section of Columbus, Ohio. Large, 70-gallon trash cans sit neatly at the curb in front of all the homes on Brookwood Road except one. There is no can in front of Laurie and Marshall Cohen's home because the Cohens and their two daughters produce only seven pounds of garbage each week. That's less than a tenth of what their own 70-gallon trash can hold and much less than other families produce. So unlike many of their neighbors who put out their trash weekly, the Cohens have to drag their can to the curb just once a month.

How do they do it? Why do they do it? In the Cohen household, reducing waste is a family effort. Marshall, a 41-year-old attorney, has built a wire compost cage in the backyard into which the family deposits all its nonmeat kitchen scraps and yard debris, turning these wastes into choice fertilizer for the flower bed. Laurie, 41, a full-time homemaker, avoids buying products packaged in nonrecyclable materials and takes reusable plastic containers with her to restaurants to use as doggy bags. Daughters Sarah, 11, and Abigail, 8, sort newspaper, cans, glass and other recyclables into appropriately marked paper bags in the recycling center Laurie has set up in the kitchen.

"It's really painless," Laurie says of the family's waste reducing efforts. "And it really does result in less trash going to the landfill." The girls help out willingly, she says, "because they really feel that they're helping the environment."

But the Cohens aren't just helping to save the planet with their earth-friendly ways. They're saving significant amounts of money too.

- To reduce electricity consumption, for example, they've switched from using standard lightbulbs throughout the house to lighting the kitchen and laundry room with compact fluorescent lights that last 10 times longer and use 70 percent less electricity. Family members are also careful to turn off lights in empty rooms. Laurie estimates that since they began implementing these and other energy-conserving practices almost two years ago, they've reduced their electricity bill by about \$200 annually.

- Instead of driving to the store for milk and then driving to the post office for stamps later in the day as they once did, the Cohens now plan ahead and run multiple errands during one car trip to save gas. They also use public transportation whenever possible for an overall savings of more than \$350 a year in transportation costs.

# 28 Easy Ways to Curb Waste

● To conserve water, the Cohens fixed a few leaky toilets and drippy faucets and now make a point of running the dishwasher and clothes washer with full loads only. They also take shorter showers and have replaced standard showerheads with “low flow” heads that aerate the flow to provide the same water pressure at a 75 percent reduction in water use. Laurie estimates that these measures save the family another \$100 yearly on water bills.

● Finally, to help reduce unnecessary consumerism, Laurie shops for some appliances and clothing in resale and thrift shops. She also buys locally grown organic produce, which advances two earth-friendly goals at once. It supports farmers who don’t use pesticides, which can seep into soil and groundwater, and it also supports farmers who don’t use fuel and other resources transporting their crops elsewhere for sale. In addition, saving on shipping reduces a farmer’s cost of doing business, which translates into lower prices for earth-friendly shoppers such as Laurie, who estimates that she now saves another \$1,800 annually on groceries.

Added together, these strategies have reduced the Cohens’ living expenses by about \$2,500 per year. “The whole environmental issue seems so huge,” says Laurie. “It’s nice to know that we as individuals can make a difference and that we can save money at the same time.”

## It takes a village to save the earth

The Cohens didn’t become such sophisticated conservationists without help. They learned many of their earth-friendly practices as members of a neighborhood-based “EcoTeam,” using a workbook created by Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP), a nonprofit organization based in Woodstock, New York, that teaches families how to live more lightly on the earth.

David Gershon, founder and president of the organization, started the EcoTeam program in 1990 to promote conservation in the United States and other industrialized countries, where it’s estimated that 20 percent of the world’s population consumes 80 percent of the world’s resources. In Columbus, Ohio, and a few other cities, towns and counties across the country, the program is now officially sponsored by local governments. (See “EcoTeam Information,” below.) More than 30,000 people in the United States and another 120,000 worldwide have participated in EcoTeam programs, and about 2,000 EcoTeams have been formed in the U. S. alone.

## Learning to conserve pays off

Anyone can start an EcoTeam project. All it takes is five or six interested families and one workbook per household. The user-friendly workbook is divided into

- 1 Recycle to send less trash to landfill.
- 2 Reduce junk mail. Write to Mail Preference Service, Direct Marketing Association, P.O. Box 9008, Farmingdale, NY 11735-9008 and ask to have your name taken off mailing lists. Ask preferred companies to keep you on their “in-house” list only.
- 3 Don’t carry home groceries in paper or plastic bags. Bring a cloth bag with you when you shop.
- 4 Compost nonmeat kitchen scraps and yard debris. It can cut waste by 25 percent.
- 5 Install a “dam” in your toilet tank to displace water. Buy one or make one out of a tightly sealed two-quart plastic jug half filled with wet sand. You’ll save 550 to 3,000 gallons of water every year.
- 6 Take shorter showers. Five minutes is all you need to get clean.
- 7 Run the dishwasher and clothes washer only when they’re fully loaded.
- 8 Keep water in the fridge for cold drinks. Running the tap wastes about 24 cups of water per minute.
- 9 Water your lawn in the early A.M. or late P.M. to avoid evaporation from sun and heat.
- 10 Landscape with plants native to your area that require little or no extra watering.
- 11 Set your thermostat at “sweater” temperature (65° to 68°F) during the day and “blanket” temperature (55° to 58°F) at night.
- 12 Get a free energy audit of your home if your utility company offers one. Insulate, caulk and weather-strip as needed.
- 13 Keep your furnace, water heater and air conditioner serviced. Inefficient operation can waste up to 50 percent of the energy used.
- 14 Make sure your refrigerator door seals tightly. Clean coils twice yearly to conserve energy.
- 15 Use energy-efficient compact fluorescent lights in your house.
- 16 Wash clothes in cold water and dry them on a clothesline if possible to cut energy consumption.
- 17 Walk, bike, carpool or use public transportation when you can.
- 18 Drive 55 instead of 75 miles per hour and burn 30 percent less fuel.
- 19 Run multiple errands during one car trip.
- 20 Buy a fuel-efficient car. Ten miles more per gallon can save \$3,000 over the life of the car. Keeping it tuned can increase mileage 40 percent.
- 21 Buy products that are minimally packaged in recyclable materials.
- 22 Buy local produce to save energy used to transport food to market. The average American meal travels more than 1,000 miles from farm to table.
- 23 Eat less meat. It takes 16 pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef.
- 24 Buy recycled paper products. They take less than half as much energy and water to produce.
- 25 Use nontoxic cleansers and yard products to reduce potential risk to the environment and human health.
- 26 Share seldom-used tools and equipment with neighbors. Each family needn’t own a whole set.
- 27 Instead of discarding unused clothes and housewares, give them to friends, donate them to a charity or hold a yard sale.
- 28 Replace recreational shopping with earth-friendly activities such as walking, gardening and bird-watching.

—Adapted with permission from the EcoTeam Workbook

sections that teach people how to conserve in five areas: garbage production, water consumption, energy use, transportation use and consumerism. Each section offers 12 or more easy actions families can take and a log for keeping track of which was taken when. The last section of the workbook encourages people who've joined a team to help start others by inviting neighbors to a sort of environmental coffee klatch to learn more about the program.

Laurie Cohen recalls that, as a busy mother of two, she "wasn't looking to take on a new project" when a neighbor invited her and Marshall to a meeting two years ago. But she agreed to look through the workbook before deciding whether to attend. "I was so impressed," she says. "The book had exactly the right amount of detail." The program and workbook are completed in eight lessons that are covered in eight meetings: two a month for four months. Laurie and Marshall signed on and soon discovered that the gatherings, which blended socializing and learning, were fun. "I found myself looking forward to them," says Laurie.

At each meeting the Cohens and their teammates assessed the steps they'd taken since they'd last met and discussed what actions they intended to take before their next meeting. After the team members had completed the program and all their new earth-friendly practices were in place, they sent their logs to GAP and received back two reports each telling them how much they had saved in money and resources as individual households and as a team.

It isn't unusual for team members to learn that they're sending 40 to 50 percent less garbage to landfills, using one fourth to one third less water and saving between \$250 and \$400 yearly on transportation and energy costs alone. Like the Cohens, many families save much more.

Husband and wife Paul Simon and Gabriela Goldfarb of Portland, Oregon, and their two children are one such family. After joining an EcoTeam in 1998, Simon, 39, an advertising copywriter, switched from driving to bicycling to work. Today he feels healthier, likes knowing he's not adding to carbon dioxide emissions, and says, "I really enjoy not writing that check every month for parking." He estimates that his savings on parking and gas now come to about \$2,000 annually. Goldfarb, 38, deputy director of a local environmental group, buys locally grown organic produce as Laurie Cohen does. She also buys food in bulk to avoid wasteful packaging. Goldfarb estimates that these practices save the family another \$500 a year.

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## Small changes can have huge impact

But saving money isn't the primary or even the secondary reason people join EcoTeams. Most sign up, says Gershon, because they care about the environment and want to become more involved in their communities. "Helping people get to know their neighbors wasn't one of the original goals of the program," he says, "but it has turned out to be as important a factor as the environmental work."

It was the combination of both that appealed to Laurie Cohen: "Building community while working toward something we believe in," she says. "I thought, 'What a great way to get to know our neighbors.'" Others agree. "It's a wonderful way to make a difference," says Melinda Saffel of Issaquah, Washington, whose son, Ben, 14, has adopted a 78 year-old member of her team as a surrogate grandmother. "He helps her with her garden and her dog and her bees," she says.

Earth-friendly actions such as biking to work and eating organic produce can also promote health, and reducing waste and energy-consumption can increase the financial and physical health of whole communities. But the real goal of the EcoTeam movement is larger. "Most of the things we're doing are simple and easy," says Goldfarb. "But if enough people do them, it will make a big difference for the planet." Ultimately, says Eve Baer, national director of programs for GAP, "we'll be saving the earth for future generations.

## EcoTeam Information: How to Get Started

**Three options are available to people who want to join or start a team..**

**1** Seven local governments sponsor EcoTeam programs: Issaquah, Washington; Deschutes County, Oregon; Kansas City, Missouri; Columbus, Ohio; Madison, Wisconsin; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Rockland County, New York. In these areas, call government information and get the listing for the EcoTeam Office or Sustainable Lifestyle Campaign, or look for Global Action Plan (GAP) in the white pages. Program materials are \$35 per household.

**2** If your city has no program, project founder David Gershon, president of GAP, suggests contacting his organization for advice on how to get your city to start one. "We'll walk you through the process," he says.

**3** You can also obtain program materials from GAP for \$38.95 per household and start your own EcoTeam. Contact: Global Action Plan, P.O. Box 428, Woodstock, NY 12498; 845-679-4830. E-mail: [info@globalactionplan.org](mailto:info@globalactionplan.org). Or visit the Web site: [www.globalactionplan.org](http://www.globalactionplan.org).