

# How to Reduce Your Household Waste



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## 1. Understanding Your Household Waste

Here's a quick breakdown of the topics we'll cover when it comes to reducing the waste you produce at home:

### Energy

Energy is generated and consumed with every activity, and it often results in releasing carbon into the environment. In addition, there is a finite amount of energy available from traditional (non-renewable) sources such as coal and oil. Developing alternative, renewable energies (such as solar, wind and geothermal) helps to reduce our dependence on non-renewable resources to power our lives.

### Water

Water covers 71 percent of the Earth's surface, but relatively little is suitable for consumption. In many parts of the world, drinkable water is in very short supply. Every time a drop of water goes down the drain, it becomes unsuitable for consumption unless properly treated.

### Solid Waste

There is only so much room available for solid waste disposal, and because landfills are so tightly packed, it takes a great deal of time for material to decompose. The easiest way to reduce solid waste is to reduce your consumption of daily products. Be cautious of what you buy, and whether anything you are going to put in a trashcan really belongs there.



## 2. Do an Audit

Don't worry, we're not talking about your taxes. These house audits can apply to every aspect of waste self-management. For an example, here we have covered a "trash audit." But it is simple to use the same principles to do an energy audit or water audit. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) is a great place to start for [professional info](#) or [DIY instructions](#).

Here's how to do a trash audit:

1. **Pick a time period** – A week is a good place to start.
2. **Get everyone on board** – If they live in your house and they make trash, they are involved, so catch 'em up to speed.
3. **Throw stuff away** – Go about your normal routine, and throw away what you usually do. It is important that you be honest with yourself and not try to be on your "best behavior." Remember, you are trying to get an accurate measurement of your waste output.
4. **Weigh in** – If you can, weigh your trash. Each time you take a trash bag out of the house, plop it on the scale. This way you can have a baseline for comparison (sort of like "before" and "after" photos when you're starting a new workout program). Though you will visually be able to see your trash dwindle, the satisfaction of cold, hard facts is the icing on the cake.
5. **Put on some gloves** – Check daily to see what you threw away that could have been recycled, composted, reused or avoided. This part is the "eeewwww" moment – we are talking about trash here. But, by doing it daily, it won't be as bad. Don't be deterred by what you find. Remember your mission; you can do it!
6. **Get graphical** – Make a list, chart, pie graph, power point... whatever you want. Just write down your findings, and use those findings to make a plan. What can you recycle that you are currently tossing in the trash? What can be composted? What can be reused and, in turn, what didn't need to be there in the first place?

### 3. Review your Findings

Once you have some data on what your wasting, it is necessary to take a seat and review it. Just by going over what you found, some easy fixes will pop up. For this reason, it is essential to make a plan. Break this plan into three major sections: “Right Now,” “Just Around the Corner” and “Down the Road.”

#### Right Now:

These items are the flashy neon signs that say “Duh!” The criteria for this section should include things that don’t take any money and very little time. They often focus more on breaking bad habits than learning something new or making major changes. These things might include:

- Turning the water off when you brush your teeth
- Recycling basic items in your curbside program
- Reusing those glass jars to get more uses out of them
- Adjusting the thermostat by a few degrees

#### Just Around the Corner:

These items are the things that make sense as a natural next step. It may cost a little money, or be more time consuming, but it is well worth it. You want these goals to be challenging but realistic. They might include:

- Replacing older light bulbs with CFLs
- Taking reusable bags to the store
- Buying and using rechargeable batteries
- Starting a compost pile

#### Down the Road:

These are the “wish list” items: those things that are your ultimate goal, take time and money and maybe even more research. Feel free to get crazy with these goals. Shoot beyond the limit, and see where you fall. After all, we are talking about what you will do years down the road here. This step is important because a lot of things are changing in green technology. What may seem a dream today, could easily be reality in five to 10 years.



- Get off the grid with solar energy
- Replace all the toilets, faucets and shower heads with ones that conserve water
- Buy a hybrid or electric car
- Organize a community recycling drive for hard-to-recycle items

### 4. Reduce Your Trash

Now that you have goals, it is time to get moving. Reducing the trash your house puts out is pretty easy once you get the hang of it. However, there are some major themes to follow:

#### 1. Recycle – Know the rules

The American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA) states that 87 percent of the U.S. population, or 268 million people, have access to curbside or drop-off recycling programs. For many people, knowing exactly what goes in the recycling bin, and what to do with stuff that doesn’t, is the challenge. Check with your local government, use the Earth911.com Recycling Search to find recycling locations near you and utilize mail-back and drop-off locations.



#### 2. Compost Your Scraps

According to the U.S. EPA, every American throws away an average of 1.3 pounds of food scraps daily. In addition to this, yard trimmings and food waste combined make up 24 percent of our nation’s municipal solid waste (MSW) stream. Starting a compost pile can happen anywhere, at any time. From your kitchen to your backyard to a worm bin, composting can make a huge dent in your waste and produce a rich product you can use to help maintain your yard, give to friends or even sell at the local farmer’s market or garden center.

#### 3. Buy Better Trash

When at the store, check out a product’s trash profile before you purchase it. If you can choose between a few options, pick the one that has the least amount of waste associated with it, such as a product using less packaging or packaging made from recyclable materials.

Also, buy in bulk and bring your own reusable containers to the store to hold these items. Make sure to know the weight of the container when it's empty, so they can subtract that from the price when you're checking out. If you need help with this, just ask the customer service desk at your local store. Once you know the weight, write in on the container and it will be easier to reference in the future. Buying in bulk not only saves waste, but money.

Even better, keep an eye out for these guys:

- **Recycled-content** products are made from materials that would otherwise have been discarded. That means these products are made totally or partially from recycled material, like aluminum cans or newspaper. Also, if a product is labeled "recycled content," the material might have come from excess or damaged items generated during normal manufacturing processes – not collected through a local recycling program.
- **Post-consumer** content is a material that has served its intended use and is being reused in a different product. "Post-consumer" also indicates that the material is not from the manufacturing process, but from a finished product that has already been used.
- **Recyclable products** can be collected and remanufactured into new products after they've been used. These products do not necessarily contain recycled materials and only benefit the environment if people recycle them after use. You can also take this one step further and think about what products recycle better than others. For example, glass is an easy material to recycle that doesn't downgrade. If you can, choose glass over plastic (which downgrades once recycled).



#### 4. Stop Buying!

It can be as simple as this: if you don't buy waste, you can't make waste. For example, a group in San Francisco did exactly that. They set out to buy nothing new for an entire year. While that might not work for everyone, the essence of it is definitely applicable in different-sized doses. Do you really need another (fill in the blank)?

Do you already have something at home that will work? Do your friends or family have something you can use or borrow? Even if it ends up that you need to buy it anyway, just getting into the habit of thinking about alternatives is a step in the right direction. Be open-minded, and see where it leads you!

#### 5. Reduce your Energy Use

If your energy audit was done by a professional team, they should be able to help you with customized tips that apply to your home. Tips can range from windows, insulation, ENERGY STAR® appliances, light timers and more.

If you are doing the audit yourself, you want to focus on a few main areas. These include:

1. Locating Air Leaks
2. Insulation
3. Heating/Cooling Equipment
4. Lighting

Now that you are focusing on these areas, here are some tips to get your head in the game:

- Clean or replace filters on furnaces once a month or as needed.
- Clean warm-air registers, baseboard heaters and radiators as needed; make sure they're not blocked by furniture, carpeting or drapes.
- When you're shopping for new windows, look for the National Fenestration Rating Council (NFRC) label; it means that the windows are performance certified.
- Select windows with air leakage ratings of 0.3 cubic feet per minute or less.
- Consider three-way lamps. They make it easier to keep lighting levels low when bright light is not necessary.
- Use outdoor lights with a photocell unit or a timer so they will turn off during the day.
- For spot lighting, consider CFLs with reflectors. These lamps range in wattage from 13- to 32-watt and provide a very directed light, using a reflector and lens system.

## 6. Reduce Water Use

There is a lot of information out there about reducing your water use. Our favorite is the Maryland Department of the Environment [Water Supply Program](#). This audit helps with water usage calculations, which are an important aspect of your overall home audit, especially when it comes to tracking your progress. Some areas of water conservation on which you can focus include:

- Regularly check sprinkler systems and timing devices to be sure they are operating properly. Turn off when storms are approaching.
- Plant native and/or drought-tolerant grasses, ground covers, shrubs and trees. Check with your local nursery for advice if you need help.
- If you wash your own car, use a bucket with soapy water and turn off the water while soaping.
- Unlike your dishwasher, the amount of water your washing machine uses is adjustable; adjust according to load size.
- Install a hot water recirculation device. By recirculating the water that would otherwise go down the drain, you can save 2-3 gallons of water for each shower taken, or 16,500 gallons a year per household. This may mean an average annual savings of \$50 on your water bill and \$40 on your energy bill.
- Reuse fish tank water on your household plants — it makes nice fertilizer, too.
- Insulate your water pipes. You'll get hot water faster and avoid wasting water.

## 7. Measure Your Progress

This is the best part of any process. Taking a moment to look back at what you have accomplished has a few benefits:

1. Everyone deserves a pat on the back – good job on your first home audit!
2. In what areas have you excelled and why?
3. In what areas are you slacking? What can you do to change?
4. What is the next step? Fix what's not working, move on to new goals or maintain what you have already built?

Once you have measured your progress, just build on what you are doing now and continue educating yourself about new and upcoming advancements. For example, a great place to stay up on new trends and information is with online newsletters or blogs. There are lots to choose from: Check out [Earth911.com's weekly emails](#) to get you started.

