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Are you Tree Free?

While reading an environmental article the other day, I came upon a term I had never heard before in reference to a greener home – ‘tree-free’. Of course, the first thing I thought to myself was “why would I want a tree-free home? I want trees around my home.” In reading further I discovered that what the term meant was to reduce the products made from trees *in* your home, such as paper products and building supplies.

Lucky for us, modern technology has made it easy to make little changes in the way we typically do things. As an example, I just received a statement in the mail for a new bank account, but rather than continue to receive the hard copy in the mail I am making arrangements to have the statement sent to me online. This will save at least two pages of paper and an envelope every month. Similarly, you can do as I have done for many years, and contact the postal service or post a note to your mailbox requesting no flyers or junk mail. If you still want to see the weekly flyers you can always find them online or even subscribe to have them sent to your inbox each week. You can also subscribe to newspapers and many magazines online.

Like newspapers and magazines, there are alternatives to many of the paper products we use in our homes. Things like paper napkins and paper towels for instance, can be replaced with cloth napkins and cloth rags made from old clothing. When there isn’t an alternative, there may be a more efficient way to use something. When it comes to computer paper you can reduce the amount you use by printing documents double-sided or printing on the unused side of once-used paper. I also find that once-used paper is great for making note pads or printing out unofficial documents.

Another way to go ‘tree-free’ is by purchasing paper products made from recyclable or sustainable materials. Greenpeace states that Americans could save more than 400,000 trees if each family bought a roll of recycled toilet paper—just once. Of course, not all recycled products are created equal: you are best to look for products such as computer paper, toilet paper and paper towel that are made with 100% recycled content; at least 50% post-consumer recycled content; and bleached without toxic chlorine compounds.

Of course, another form of recycling is reusing. In a recent newsletter that I read regularly there were a number of suggested reading materials. But rather than linking to the website where the books are sold, I first checked Amazon.ca for any used copies available. I found all the books I wanted online, in used condition, and saved money at the same time. Another option is to visit your local library or share books with friends.

When you are ready to take the next big step to being tree-free you can even start looking at alternative building materials. Perhaps with the limited-time offer (February 1, 2010) of the Federal Government Home Renovation Tax Credit you are already looking into construction or renovations in your home, in which case some of the following materials might already be an option for you: bamboo (flooring), true (natural) linoleum, or previously used (recycled/vintage) wood.

I'm still not entirely sure I like the term "tree-free", but I do like the concept, so maybe I'll use "tree-friendly" instead!

Valerie Hillier is a Frederictonian who tries to tread lightly on the earth; and notices when other people do too! If you have a topic you would like our Green Matters writers to write about e-mail us at: greenmatters@fredericton.ca.