

DOLLARS & SENSE

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20 conservation tips that save your money (and the planet)

Everybody wants to save money, and hopefully, everybody wants to give back to their community. An easy way to do both is through energy and water conservation. Turning off lights, and turning your thermostat up (or down) by 2 degrees are some common energy saving tips. However, there are ways to go above and beyond the well-known advice to turn up your conservation efforts and turn down your spending. Here are 20 powerful tips that will help you save money and the planet.

Cook smaller. Using a crockpot, toaster oven or microwave to cook or warm your food uses far less energy than a conventional oven. A crockpot (or slow cooker) gives you the added benefit of additional free time.

Stock up. If your meal requires that you use a conventional oven, consider cooking more than one meal at a time and freezing the excess meals to save future energy usage. This suggestion will also give you quick and easy meals for those busy evenings.

Keep it full. Each time you open your freezer, warm air comes in and cold air

escapes. Your freezer then has to use energy to cool the invading warm air. A full freezer gives less room for warm air to invade, and all of those frozen items help your freezer cool any minimal warm air that sneaks in. If you cannot fill it with food, consider freezing gallons of water to take up space (and to help keep your food frozen during a power outage!).

Showers over baths. A standard bathtub holds approximately 35-50 gallons of water. By comparison a 10-minute shower with a newer model, standard showerhead uses approximately 25-35 gallons of water. Not only does showering save you money by using less water, but it will also save your energy costs of heating the water.

Power shower. We have already established that showers are more economical than baths, but taking it a step further and limiting your showers to 5 minutes will double your energy and water savings. Use an alarm or timer to help you stay within your allotted time frame.

Air-dry your dishes. Setting your dishwasher to economy wash and turning off the heat dry setting will save you money in several ways. Economy wash will use less water, and air-drying will use less energy. Also, in the summer months it won't unnecessarily warm up your home, forcing your cooling system to work harder. It's a win-win!

Out with the old. Thanks to minimum federal energy efficiency standards, new appliances run more efficiently and use much less energy. That is why it is important to replace old appliances. When selecting a new appliance, look for the Energy Star® label, they are the most efficient appliances and often use less than half the energy of a 10+-year-old model. In the long term, a more energy efficient appliance will significantly reward you with savings.

Outdoor living. Cooking outdoors is not only fun, but efficient! Grilling or Dutch oven cooking saves energy and money by eliminating the need to use your large kitchen appliances. It also eliminates passive heating of the house, making it easier for your AC to do its job. Additionally, in the winter-time, if you must cook with a conventional oven, it can also help heat your

(Continued on page 2)

20 Conservation Tips

(Continued from page 1)

house. Disclaimer: Never use a conventional oven for the sole purpose of heating your house (It's dangerous!).

Get some air. Faucet aerators are cool little devices that easily connect to the end of your existing faucet or shower and add air to your water stream. Why is this beneficial? Well, you use much less water without compromising water pressure, and by much less water, we mean up to 75% less water! Best of all at under \$5, they are inexpensive. It doesn't get any better than that!

Did you know?!

Did you know that a faucet that leaks one drop of water per second can add up to 155 gallons of water a month?

The U.S. Constitutes 5% of the world population but consumes 24% of the world's energy?

Hand washing a load of dishes (12 place settings) uses an average of 27 gallons of water. An energy-efficient dishwasher uses on average 4 gallons of water per cycle. That is a saving of 23 gallons of water per load!

One ceiling fixture can use \$2,000 to \$5,000 of electricity over its useful life.

Light up your life. Replace your light fixtures with LED light bulbs. LED lights provide a crisp and bright light with very little energy usage. They cost about 80% less to operate than incandescent lights do, and they create no residual heat. Although they may be a

little more expensive initially, you can get a good LED bulb for less than \$20. When you consider the light quality, monthly cost savings and an average rated lifespan of 40,000-50,000 hours, it is a great investment.

Close some vents. It is a good idea to close air vents in rooms that you do not regularly live in, for example, a guest room or mudroom. Closing a few vents will help save wasted heating and cooling expense. It is important to note that closing too many vents can negatively impact your system, and force it to work harder, so don't overdo it.

Keep it drawn. Keeping your shades and curtains drawn during the warm summer months will keep the sun from heating up your home and reduce your need for cooling. Conversely, opening your blinds will allow the sun to heat up your home, helping take some of the burden off of your furnace.

Cold is king. Wash your clothes with cold water. Laundry detergents today work just as well cleaning in cold water, and you can save up to 40 cents a load! Also, be sure to run full loads, it will save time, energy, and the machine will work more efficiently.

Turn it down. Reduce your water heater temperature from 140 to 120 degrees. Reducing the temperature keeps your water hot enough to clean adequately and still saves you money. It will also increase your safety by reducing your chances of serious burns.

Stop energy vampires. All electronics use a small amount of electricity even when turned off or on standby. Using a power strip that can be turned off when your electronics are not in use will save you some serious dough and benefit the environment. For even more protection, consider a surge protector that gives you the benefit of a power strip but keeps your expensive electronic equipment safe from power surges.

Slow the flow. Keep your sink faucets, showerheads and toilets in good repair. Fixing even a small, slow leak from one faucet can save you 34 gallons of water per year. Taking the time to keep your plumbing well maintained will help stop the leaks from your faucets and your wallet.

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Create a drought tolerant landscape. Replacing your lawn with plants that are native to your region by xeriscaping, mulching and using efficient irrigation practices will drastically reduce your water usage and save you both time and money.

Catch and save. Using a rain barrel to catch water for your garden and landscaping needs is a straightforward, economical way to conserve water and money. Rainwater catchment systems can be simple or complex, use what works best for you. Also, be sure to check your state laws for any water storage limits that may be enforced.

Keep it clean. Keep your furnace clean and replace your filter every three months. A dirty furnace and dirty air filters slow the airflow and make the furnace work harder while giving a less efficient output.

Seal it. Keep your home from leaking money by sealing your windows and doors with weather stripping and caulk. Don't forget to use a sealant around pipes and vents that go through walls, floors or ceilings. Adding additional insulation to the attic space and exterior walls will go a long way to helping keep the heat and cool where it belongs.

(Continued on page 4)

Utility equal payment plans

With the dog days of summer comes the often astronomical cost of cooling our homes. Many seniors and people with a fixed income, struggle to pay the cost and often, they will suffer in high heat rather than pay what they cannot afford. By the time the need to cool our homes has passed, it is time to turn up the heat.

We have all fallen victim to the strain that the seasonal highs and lows of utility bills bring. One solution that many people consider is a utility budget plan (also known as an equal payment plan). An equal payment plan is a program that allows you to pay the same amount of money each month for one

year based on the average of your previous 12-month usage. At the end of your budget plan year, your account will be settled by receiving credit if your account is in the positive or a bill if you owe more than you paid. Equal payments can be a good tool to use when working on a tight budget that requires few variables. Let's examine the "good" and "not so good" of the equal payment plan.

The Good: Knowing the exact amount of money you owe each month makes it easier to anticipate and plan a budget. Your budget will not be thrown off due to large swings in utility costs due to seasonal needs such as heating and

air conditioning. Good budgeting is an essential tool to stay out of debt when on a tight income.

The Not So good: If you use more than what was averaged each month, you may end up owing a large amount at the end of the year. That could be a large bill that you are unable to pay. Also, if your goal is to use less of your utilities, it may be harder to ascertain if you are hitting your conservation goals. Usually, getting a large bill helps you know when it's time to evaluate your utility usage, and an equal payment plan could lull you into a sense of security and hinder your evaluation.

How do you know if an equal payment plan is right for you? Chances are if you are on a fixed income, a tight budget or have extremely high seasonal costs, an equal payment plan could be a helpful tool. Because the details of an equal payment plan vary by company, it's important to ask your utility company questions such as

- How often will they reevaluate and change your payment?
- If less than what was averaged is used at the end of the year, how is your credit issued?
- If you owe money at the end of the year, does the amount you owe have to be paid in full, or can it be averaged over the next 12 months?
- Do they charge any fees or interest to use their equal monthly payment billing?

Remember that the rules and regulations of a utility budget plan vary by company and state.

If you are having a hard time paying your utilities, there may be programs that can assist you in addition to an equal payment plan. You can go to <http://www.benefits.gov> and look up your benefits by category under "Energy Assistance" to find available programs in your state. Program qualification guidelines will vary by state. ■

"Social Security and Garnishments."

Few things are as stressful as tight finances. When you are on social security, falling into debt can be a serious matter. Collection agencies often incorporate scare tactics, to push you into making payments, regardless of if you can afford a payment or not. One of these tactics is to threaten to garnish your wages, but the question is, can they garnish social security? It turns out that it depends on who is trying to collect. The good news is thanks to Section 207 of the Social Security Act most creditors cannot garnish your social security. However, just because Section 207 protects you from most garnishments it doesn't mean that it protects you from all garnishments. Below are the exceptional debts that can be garnished from your social security benefits.

- Overdue Federal taxes (Up to 15% of your monthly payment)
- Non-tax debt owed to another Federal agency.
- To enforce child support and alimony obligations
- Certain civil penalties under the Mandatory Victim Restitution Act (18 U.S.C. 3613).

If you owe these specific types of debts, a percentage of your social security wages can be garnished. Also, be aware that although most creditors are unable to garnish your social security, this does not stop them from pursuing legal action and seizing any allowable assets or garnishing other wages. It is always best to avoid these types of unpleasant legal proceedings by communicating with your debt collector long before it gets to court. Most creditors will offer a payment plan to help you settle your debt.

Enjoy Summer Now— But Don't Pay for It Later

When the weather is beautiful, we tend to see the many ways we could enjoy it. When funds are tight, it can be tempting to take a drive to the nearest payday loan center for some spending cash. Applying for a payday loan online is easy, and thousands of people are doing it.

Some have called the rate of growth in this business “explosive.” Unfortunately, many of the people getting these loans will find their enjoyment of summer diminishing instead of increasing. Here are just some of the reasons why:

Fees for a payday loan are charged per \$100 borrowed. For a loan of \$400 at a \$15 per \$100 fee, your repayment amount is \$460—and that does not include interest!

The term for a payday loan can range from a few days to three weeks — usually due by your next payday. If you can't repay the full amount of the loan, you will be charged the \$15 per \$100 fee again. Your \$400 loan will now cost you \$520 to pay back, and you've only borrowed the money for a month! Some loan companies will let you repeat this cycle up to six times. At that point, you will owe \$760 for a \$400 loan. If you get paid every two weeks, you will pay \$360 to borrow the money for three months. Don't be tricked into thinking this is less than the interest on a bank loan.

If you can't pay the money you borrowed plus fees in the maximum allowed time-frame, you will default on your loan and things will get ugly. You will be charged overdraft or NSF fees by your bank when the payday loan company attempts to withdraw the money you owe from your account. The payday loan company will send your account to a collection agency, and the collection will report on your credit score.

It's possible you will eventually end up in court, making the loan even costlier. Many people like to apply for a payday loan online so they can keep their financial situation more private. But just how private is it?

Online applications require your name, address, and employment information; your Social Security number and driver's license number; your checking account number and bank routing number; and the list goes on. Some will also require that you fax your latest pay stub, most recent bank statement, and a voided check. Are you sure you know these people well enough to trust them with all that information?

Instead of buying into the hype of a payday loan try some of these other ideas to get some cash for your summer fun.

Have a Yard Sale. Many items around our homes are rarely used, or are just sitting around collecting dust. Get these items out and see if they can make you some extra cash. You can advertise in the local penny saver, nickel ads or newspapers. Invite neighbors to join in and advertise it as a community event to draw a larger crowd.

Visit the local pawn shop. Old bicycles, musical instruments, jewelry and tools are all great items to pawn. Don't expect to make back the item's full value though. They are in the business to make money too.

Advertise your items on Craigslist, eBay or your local news agency. Many local papers and websites have a free or inexpensive item posting area.

If all else fails, applying for a short term personal loan or home equity line of credit will cost you less interest than a Payday loan and provide a longer term to pay it back. The best option is to not spend more than you have. ■

20 conservation tips

(Continued from page 2)

Buy a programmable thermostat. Because these nifty little gadgets can set the temperature of your home around your families living schedule, the EPA estimates that the average homeowner can save up to \$180 per year with a properly programmed unit.

Paint your roof white. In a study by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory's Heat Island group, it was found that buildings with white roofs required up to 40% less energy for cooling than buildings with black roofs. You can find inexpensive white elastomeric coating that will do the trick at most home improvement or hardware stores.

Turn it off. Do not needlessly run water while doing things like brushing your teeth, shaving or washing your dishes. Fill a vessel with the amount of water you will need to complete your tasks, such as a cup, a bowl or a sink.

With a little presence of mind and awareness, saving energy is easy. Integrating these 20 energy saving tips into your everyday life will help your community, the environment and your pocketbook! ■



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