

# Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

[EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info](mailto:EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info)



## What Does Green Mean?

**Dear EcoGirl:** With so many companies claiming to be green nowadays, does this word even mean anything any more? How do I know which actions really make a difference for the planet? *Signed, Greenwashed*

**Dear Greenwashed:** Congratulations for wanting to help steer our culture in a truly positive eco-direction.

And, yes, while it's great that earth values have become more popular, it does mean that we need to look beneath claims to recognize the more committed offerings and effective approaches. Here are some tips on how you can do this.

### Ways to be Wisely Green

**1) Understand the criteria underneath a product's green claims.** What are the specifics? How do these elements compare with others in the same category? Common valuable criteria include: organic, less-toxic, biodegradable, used, recycled, recyclable, energy-efficient, natural, durable, minimally-packaged, locally-made, and sustainably-harvested.

**2) Learn the eco-labels.** While eco-terms do help us make purchase decisions, the quality of their definitions and enforcement does vary. So, for instance, "organic" food has a strong definition and is enforced by law with third-party verification. Other terms, such as "natural," generally don't have legally-backed specifics so you'll need to look further to clarify the producer's meaning. Discover more about these labels at [www.eco-labels.org](http://www.eco-labels.org).

**3) Green your activities beyond products.** While a particular product might be greener within its category (e.g., recycled paper towels), an even more earth-nurturing choice

might to shift to a different approach (e.g., from disposable to reusable products).

Similarly, while it's great to include green features if you're already building a new house, the greener choice is usually to improve an existing home instead, thus leveraging the eco-investments already paid. (For great ideas on this, check out *Natural Remodeling for the Not-So-Green House*. Also, see the green building criteria at [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org).)

And, if you need to buy a car anyway, certainly choose one with higher fuel efficiency. However, you don't need to buy a new vehicle to reduce your impact. You can save the financial and eco-costs of a new car by looking for ways to reduce the miles you travel in your current car — for instance, by grouping errands together, carpooling, living closer to work, or adding some biking or public transit to your transportation routine.

**4) Be guided by "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle."** This handy mantra helps us address the core problem in our cumulative activities: we're outstripping the earth's capacity in the materials we take and the waste and pollution we return. By reducing our consumption throughput, we lower the impacts at all phases of production, including mining, manufacturing, transportation, use, and disposal. We can also often save money and declutter our lives as well!

Therefore, look for ways to **reduce** what you buy, buy just what you need, and prioritize durable over cheap products. Minimize packaging by buying in bulk. **Reuse** by buying other people's used items and selling or donating your own, thus making fuller use of each product's eco-costs. Seek to repair or

update items before discarding them. And, when a product's usefulness is done, **recycle** it properly, thus offering the raw materials for new products. See how close to zero waste you can get in your life!

**5) Be committed, not perfect.** Taking action doesn't mean that we have to do everything all at once; it's OK to balance your choices with other priorities. Still, let the urgency of the earth's current situation motivate you to keep finding opportunities to move in a greener direction.

**6) Have fun.** Eco-action doesn't have to be about fear or suffering. Being part of the solution and aligning with the earth's ways can bring you increased joy, creativity, and personal expression. Constructive action is the antidote to despair!

Make a game out of finding ways to protect the earth's ecosystems and resources. As more and more of us do this, we'll see the future become brighter for our children and all creatures on earth.

For more specifics on these ideas, see my other columns at [www.askecogirl.info](http://www.askecogirl.info).

*Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <[EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info](mailto:EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info)> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl: Encouraging the eco-hero in everyone."*

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