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# Goodbye green guilt, hello change

## Next year will be all about making small changes to help the planet.

**By Jennifer Willis**

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As the new year approaches, I like to reflect on what's gone right – and wrong – during the previous 12 months, and how I can improve in the coming year.

As a "green geek" with a guilty conscience, I find myself focused on how I've failed my planet this past year:

I have canvas grocery bags, but they live in the closet and rarely make it to the store. Plastic bags are handy when I'm walking the dog, but after carrying food they're frequently torn and go straight to the garbage.


I've lingered in hot showers. Yes, I'm usually cold and I have been known to shiver when it's 80 degrees F., but there are other ways to get warm.

More often than I'd like to admit, I've chosen to drive over taking mass transit.

My composting worms died because I didn't bring the compost box inside soon enough when it got hot in the summer. Similarly, many of my potted herbs burned in the sun.


I feed two stray cats, which attracts raccoons and possums into my courtyard, thus messing with my neighborhood's wetland ecosystem. Fortunately, my guilt begins to subside slightly when I realize that I'm doing some things to help the planet.

I am conscientious about turning out lights when I leave the room, and I recycle my newspapers and magazines or pass them along to neighbors. I work from home and so don't have a daily commute, but I'm learning the cycling rules of the road so I can take my bike instead of the car when I need to go somewhere. I shut off the water while I brush my teeth.




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Then that "green guilt" creeps back up again. I use a gas clothes dryer instead of a laundry line – although I'm not sure how to "sun dry" clothes in the Pacific Northwest, where it rains 75 percent of the year. I buy only compact fluorescent light bulbs, but I also buy too much food and don't consume it all before it goes bad.

I know I can do better.

My boyfriend laughs at my green guilt. I save ribbons from birthday and holiday gifts, but I have no use for them myself, but I keep thinking they'll be good for something other than breeding in drawers. Damaged-but-repairable items – such as a leaky garden hose or a floor lamp with a broken base – collect dust. No one on Freecycle or Craigslist wants this stuff, and Goodwill would just throw it out. Trying to be a good steward lands me in nearly constant conflict and has me living in clutter.

So I look to 2009 as the "year of balance" – about enjoying my life and my home while still being part of the environmental solution.

"Think globally, act locally" isn't always easy. It's not so hard to have tree seedlings planted in someone's name instead of sending a holiday card, or to buy chocolate with a "Save the Rainforest" logo at Trader Joe's. But taking a closer look at more mundane habits – such as forgoing the blow-dryer or picking up litter instead of passing it by – can be more painful, even when it's these small, everyday decisions that make the biggest difference.

For me, 2009 needs to be about making amends to the earth by adopting more consistent actions that are small, uneventful, and immediate. On New Year's Day, I can light a candle in recognition of the looming energy crisis. I can wear white in hopeful honor of a cleaner planet. And I can take a "green timeout" to come up with a more sustainable, personal plan for the coming year.

I'll keep printing on both sides of the paper in my home office, and I'll find a box to store used printer cartridges for recycling instead of throwing them away to keep the dog from eating them. I can plan grocery lists for a week or a month at a time – and include regular visits to my local farmers' markets – so I'm consuming more efficiently and more economically. I can make my own cleaning products in reusable jugs and spray bottles, and I can invest in a clothes drying rack.


And I can cut myself some slack. My intentions are good and my efforts sincere, but I am still human. I will make mistakes, but I cannot continue to be stymied by green guilt.

New Year's resolutions are about hope and change and moving forward, and it's up to me to wipe my own slate clean. Jan. 1 is about closing out the past, taking a deep breath, and trying again.

I'll just have to trust the planet to forgive me when I stumble.

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