

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info



Greening Our Techno-Tools

Dear EcoGirl: I'm considering buying a new computer. How can I make a green choice? *Signed, A Soccer Mom*

Dear Soccer Mom: Congratulations on seeking to care for the earth in your actions. Yes, our daily lives can be enhanced in many ways by today's technological devices, including computers, cell phones, cameras, TVs, stereos, game players, and more.

However, it's vital for us to be smart about our use of these techno-toys, because they do have eco-impacts throughout their lifecycles. Materials are extracted from the earth to produce them, energy is required for their shipping and use, and their disposal creates toxic-filled electronic waste (or "e-waste") — over 2 million tons of it a year in the U.S. alone.

Luckily, we can help minimize this harm while benefiting more from our products — and even saving money as well!

What you can do

1) Extend your products' lives. It's easy to get caught up in our cultural addiction to buying the latest gizmo and treating the last one as disposable. However, by keeping your computer or cell phone a year or two longer, you can often help both the environment and your wallet. To do this, learn the tricks for optimizing the use of your devices, and explore repairing and upgrading them before discarding. Many resources are available to help with this, both online and in our community.

2) Buy electronics selectively. Purchase used equipment whenever possible, to stretch your budget and more fully utilize the items' embed-

ded eco-costs. If you're buying new, look beneath vague green claims to identify products that offer specific eco-features, such as energy efficiency, toxics reduction, recycled content, ability to upgrade, eco-packaging, and design for end of life. For information about particular computers, see (www.epeat.net) and (www.greenpeace.org/usa/news/green-gadgets-the-search-con). Also, encourage your business, organization, and government bodies to specify EPEAT-rated products.

3) Sell or donate for reuse. When you're done with a device, offer it to someone who can use it, such as a friend, school, or charity. Or post an ad for free on **Craigslist** (www.craigslist.org) or **SonoMax** (www.sonomax.org). You might even make some cash in the deal, while clearing space in your life. Another great option is Santa Rosa's non-profit **Computer Recycling Center** (570-1600, www.crc.org), which refurbishes many items for resale and to donate to non-profits. (You can also get deals there on computer equipment.)

4) Dispose of electronics at appropriate sites, not in the trash. Once an electronic product's usefulness is done, you can ask the manufacturer if it has a **takeback program** or look for an **e-waste collection event**. Also, some items can be dropped off at **Sonoma County Refuse Disposal Sites** (including the Petaluma dump); at **select stores**; and in the blue recycling cans of **some towns**.

For more about your options, see the **Sonoma County Waste Management Agency's website** (www.recyclenow.org) or **Recycling Guide** (in the AT&T Yellow Pages under "R"; then turn to page 20). Or call 565-3375. Note: When choosing

a drop-off site, identify which items they accept, their hours, any fees, and tax deductibility. Also, remove any batteries.

5) Encourage industry improvement. To enhance the options we have available, ask your favorite manufacturers to green their products, suggesting the eco-criteria at (www.epeat.net/Criteria.aspx). Also, urge the cell phone makers that are developing a universal re-charger for the European market to offer it to Americans as well; this would save us money and reduce toxic waste (www.lohas.com/articles/102141.html). And ask your e-waste recycler if it has applied for e-Stewards certification, which will launch in early 2010 and include third-party auditing of practices (www.e-stewards.org). Explore more about industry-level initiatives at (www.greenercomputing.com).

Through actions like these, we can all help save energy, trim hazardous waste, reduce air and water pollution, and cut greenhouse gasses. The earth will be grateful!

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> for possible inclusion in future columns. View past columns at <www.AskEcoGirl.info>. Also contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl: Encouraging the eco-hero in everyone."

© Copyright Patricia Dines, 2009. All rights reserved.

Published in the West County Gazette, July 2009.

For more Ask EcoGirl, see www.askecogirl.info