



Simple Steps. Big Impact.

EnviroTips.org

EnviroTip #11: A Home Checklist

What can one suburban family do to make a difference for the climate?

In our home, it's just one simple change at a time, and we learn more every day. Others have taken their zero-waste, nature-connected lives much deeper than we have and I applaud their passion and commitment.

But for my husband and myself, recognizing what each of us is willing to change – and what each of us is NOT willing to change – has sometimes been a challenge.



Buddha with butterfly puddlers

This list of more than 100 simple steps was built over many years of living in a way that is mindful of our choices and intentional about our decisions, sprinkled with lots of compromises.

If you're inspired to make some changes yourself, read through this list and see what resonates with you.

Five Essentials for a Resilient World

As I think about the changes we'll make, I focus on the Five Essentials for a Resilient World:

- Reconnect to Nature
- Respect all Life
- Regreen our Planet
- Revamp our Spending
- Replenish our Resources



Read our [introductory EnviroTip](#) for a full explanation of each of the Five Essentials.

How to use this Checklist

Rate the following areas according to what you are currently doing then circle the steps you want to start to work on. Recheck your score every month to notice the impact you're having for a healthy, nature-connected life!

3 = I do this well (e.g., frequently)

2 = I do this OK (e.g., occasionally)

1 = I barely or rarely do this

0 = I never do this

? = This never occurred to me

General Tips



- Have at least one houseplant, picture, or object from nature in every room.
- Eliminate single-use packaging, straws, and beverage containers – especially plastics and polystyrene.

- ❑ Avoid buying anything new if you can borrow it, find it second-hand, re-imagine it from some other waste product, or decide you don't need it at all. Almost all of the decorative accessories are from re-sale shops.
- ❑ Unplug all electrical appliances that don't need to be plugged in all the time.
- ❑ Re-imagine your outdoor space – all of it – as delightful habitat for your family as well as the family of non-humans who make their home in your yard. Ask yourself if each decision is just for the human aesthetic or could it be expanded to include the needs of birds, bees, butterflies, and soil? Set the mower to the highest level and mow as seldom as possible.
 - ❑ Plant beneficial gardens – either native wildflowers & shrubs or vegetables – in place of all that grass.
 - ❑ Only buy plants that are adapted to our weather patterns and don't need extra water or chemicals to thrive. See the resource list below.
 - ❑ Buy plants that have not been treated with pesticides, especially neonicotinoids, and don't use chemicals in your yard.
 - ❑ Plant for all seasons to provide habitat, host plants, and food sources as well as blooms .
 - ❑ Intentionally create shelter and habitats like frogscapeing and birdhouses.

Resources

- ❑ Kansas City Resources: Metropolitan Energy Center's [Project Living Proof](#) demonstration home
- ❑ Mid America Regional Council's [RecycleSpot.org](#)
- ❑ KCPL's energy program – LED light bulbs throughout
- ❑ Shopping and living without single-use packaging: [ZeroWasteKC](#) Facebook page or [ZeroWasteNerd.com](#)
- ❑ Gardening for pollinators, birds, healthy water, clean air: [Deep Roots KC](#) (formerly [Kansas City Native Plant Initiative](#)), [GrowNative](#), [Missouri & Kansas Extension Master Naturalists](#), [Burroughs Audubon Society](#), [Bridging the Gap's Heartland Tree Alliance](#) and [Native Plants](#) program
- ❑ Growing food: [Cultivate KC](#), [Food not Lawns](#), [Giving Grove](#)
- ❑ Composting: [Missouri Organic](#), [KC Can Compost](#), [Compost Collective](#)
- ❑ Internet resources
 - ❑ Health & beauty and cleaning products: [Environmental Working Group Better World Shopping Guide](#)
 - ❑ Find a location where you can drop off your compost or offer to let others share their compost with you: [ShareWaste](#)
 - ❑ Sierra Club's [Ask Mr. Green](#)

Resiliency Tools

- ❑ Take it simply, one change at a time. Read through our library of [EnviroTips: Simple Steps. Big Impact](#) for inspiration and explanation of why certain steps are important.
- ❑ Enlist the whole family in making the decisions and act first on those where there is a consensus; speak from your heart about why it's important to you
 - ❑ Print this list then check off your upcoming goals and highlight those that you've accomplished
 - ❑ Create a timeline for implementing various changes
 - ❑ Assign a family member to be the accountability manager and quality control inspector
- ❑ For the more difficult changes, see what compromises you can make (for example, I used my own recycled toilet paper for many years while my husband continued to use Charmin!)
- ❑ Donate to local and global charities that are protecting or restoring what you love
- ❑ Volunteer locally and know you're making a difference
- ❑ Join a supportive organization or community that shares your nature-aware heart
- ❑ Forward this list to everyone you know and include a personal note about why this is important to you!
- ❑ Publish your adventures on social media and talk about it with others – this is a really important step. You'll be teaching others and encouraging them to make their changes too.

The Back Story

We moved into this 50-year-old home about a year ago and these are the changes we've made since then. Most changes are inexpensive, minimal, and simple.

Front Yard



← Planting native bee balm and asters among the boxwoods.

- ❑ Planted native wildflowers and shrubs between the formal boxwood and euonymus hedges to provide nectar, pollen, and nesting habitat for native pollinators

- ❑ Gradually replacing non-beneficial plants like Stella De Oro daylilies, hydrangeas, and liropes with native perennials and shrubs

- ❑ Installed two Hummingbird feeders and keep them clean and full ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup white sugar – NOT

organic! – mixed well in 1 cup boiling water is the best recipe)

- ❑ Provided butterfly bubblers (shallow water containers with sand) – butterflies sip the water and get minerals from the sand
- ❑ Planted native ground covers (pussytoes by the street and roundleaf groundsel by the sidewalk) to gradually replace much of the front lawn
- ❑ Replaced non-native annuals (impatiens) with purple coneflower (echinacea) for pollen, nectar, and birdseed
- ❑ Planted two native tree saplings – sycamore and redbud – to begin to create an understory beneath the large oak tree; gradually add understory native groundcover and shrubs
- ❑ Will gradually remove rock-covered beds and heavy wood mulch and replace them with open dirt, native ground covers, and shredded leaf mulch for habitat for native bees.
- ❑ Placed signs from Grow Native by the street: “Native Plant Garden” and “Leave the Leaves”

Back Yard



Year one: re-wilding the backyard.

- ❑ Reseeded empty spots in the back yard with clover for pollinator benefit (especially bumblebees) and to add nitrogen to the soil. We mow less often than the front yard to give the clover a chance to bloom.
- ❑ Stopped mowing $\frac{3}{4}$ of the back yard to allow an urban re-wilding of a native meadow. It will take 2-3 years before it comes into its own as a fully mature garden requiring almost no watering or maintenance except to keep tree seedlings or invasive shrubs from sprouting. Native wildflowers and grass meadows absorb as much or more carbon (CO₂) as a forest of trees!
- ❑ Seeded bare spots with native wildflower and grass seeds – some may take three years to germinate and emerge.
- ❑ Planted native plants – currently blooming swamp milkweed, sunflower, spiderwort, liatris, yarrow, butterfly milkweed, lanceleaf coreopsis.

- ❑ Edged with hedge apple (Osage Orange) logs from friends who cleared a patch of these non-native trees from their property. A clean garden edge makes a wild wildflower meadow look less unkempt.
- ❑ Planted native bee balm (monarda), gayfeather (liatris) and goldenrods and other natives between the rose bushes and in the formal garden along the fence.
- ❑ Put out bird feeders, hummingbird feeder, and birdbath – clean regularly with baking soda and dish soap and rinse well.
- ❑ Installed two compost bins for kitchen scraps and yard cleanup – one to use currently and one to sit and biodegrade.
- ❑ Registered our compost bins on the ShareWaste.com site and have been contacted by two people who live nearby to have them bring their food scraps to add to our bins.
- ❑ Found native barren strawberry groundcover under the magnolia tree – will remove 1/2 the hostas in the fall to allow the strawberries to have more room to grow.
- ❑ Have a brush pile under the magnolia tree to keep fallen branches and twigs from tree/shrub trimming – these make good cover for birds, and as they decompose they will provide habitat for insects and improve soil quality.
- ❑ Will remove the non-native ornamental grasses and Stella De Oro daylilies this fall and install a native/berry hedge garden to provide fruit and cover for birds.
- ❑ Created a spot between the patio and the neighbor's wooden fence to save/store autumn leaves. Next spring we'll mulch some to use around shrubs and trees.
- ❑ Next spring we'll fill the bin by the compost bins with fresh leaves to layer in the compost as we add new kitchen waste.
- ❑ Autumn leaves are not mulched or composted since they host overwintering pollinators like the Luna Moth. After these critters emerge in the spring, last year's leaves can be shredded.
- ❑ Planted herbs and tomatoes in large pots. Most herbs are host plants for many species of butterflies and moths – fennel, dill, parsley (black swallowtail butterfly), tomatoes (hummingbird moth), thyme (lacewings – a beneficial insect).
- ❑ Planted native strawberries and plan to build large raised beds grow more native fruit and to green-up a big portion of the cement patio.
- ❑ Filled annual pots with nectar plants grown with no chemicals (no neonicotinoids), herbs, and native perennials that will be planted in the yard in the fall.

Side Yards

- ❑ Installed 65-gal. rain barrel to capture rainwater from a downspout (a 1" rain on a 1000 sq. ft. roof created 600 gallons of water!) Reduces flooding and erosion and prevents chemicals from the roof from going into the streamway system.
- ❑ Planted native milkweeds and hyssop by house.
- ❑ Will replace non-native shrubs as they die with native ones.

Bedrooms

- ❑ Covered air vents in unused rooms.
- ❑ Keep curtains open to let in natural light and to see the nature outside the window
- ❑ Hung pictures of nature in many rooms
- ❑ Purchased organic cotton, hemp, bamboo, and other sustainable sheets and bed linens.

Bathrooms

- ❑ We turn off the water when brushing teeth or shaving.
- ❑ We use 100% post-consumer-waste or other sustainable toilet paper & tissues, and organic, fair-trade beauty and health care products.
 - ❑ Q-Tips with wooden stems so they can be composted
 - ❑ EcoDent toothbrush – replace the brush head only; can recycle heads and handles with the manufacturer
 - ❑ EcoDent floss – recyclable paper container, vegan wax
 - ❑ Organic, hemp, or bamboo towels

Home Office

- ❑ Print on both sides of the page; print 2-up on the page; don't print at all.
- ❑ Use 100% post-consumer waste or other sustainable paper.
- ❑ Print business cards and promotional materials using GreenerPrinter an environmentally-conscious printer

- ❑ Power strips on all electronic equipment so it can all be turned off with one switch.
- ❑ Recycle printer cartridges.
- ❑ Recycle gently used or extra office supplies with [Scraps KC](#) – check their online list of items.
- ❑ Recycle electronic equipment at county recycling days or take to [Connecting For Good](#) (used to be Surplus Exchange).
- ❑ Purchase office equipment and supplies from a resale shop like Scraps KC or Connecting for Good.
- ❑ Use [Ecosia](#) for the browser (instead of Bing, Google, MSN, or Yahoo).
- ❑ Host websites with a sustainable hosting company ([GreenGeeks.com](#)).

Kitchen

- ❑ Cleaning products are eco-friendly dish soap, baking soda, vinegar, and Bartender’s Friend.
- ❑ Dishwasher is highly-rated [Energy Star](#) compliant; only run it when it’s full.
- ❑ Dishwasher soap and dish soaps are organic and non-harmful to the environment.
- ❑ For hand-washing dishes, I fill the small sink or a small tub with soapy water and wash it all in there, then rinse rather than letting the water run the whole time I’m washing.
- ❑ Paper towels: one of us never uses them since we have a big drawer of old fabric and towel scraps to use for cleanups; one of us uses paper towels all the time but they are made from 100% post-consumer waste recycled paper .
- ❑ Most food we purchase is organic, fair trade, and local whenever possible..
- ❑ We compost all our non-meat food scraps, pizza boxes, and paper towels.

Laundry Room

- ❑ Laundry products are organic and non-harmful to the environment.
- ❑ Washer and dryer are highly-rated [Energy Star](#) compliant and use the eco-friendly settings.
- ❑ Run larger loads to save water, keep the filter clean.
- ❑ Hang up wet clothes whenever possible. I hang up items that aren’t wrinkled – like polyester shirts, underwear, and kitchen towels. Everything else goes into the dryer for just about 5 minutes to get the wrinkles out, and then I

hang them up immediately to finish drying. If towels are too rough, I dry them longer by machine.

Garage

This is the Recycling Center! Items that cannot go in the curbside recycling include:



Recycling special items

- ❑ Clean plastic bags and other plastic wrap go to the bins at the entrance of most grocery stores to be recycled into something else, such as [Trex decking](#) .

- ❑ Glass is recycled with Ripple Glass – you can leave the labels and metal or plastic lids on the bottles – [here's the list](#) of what they accept.

- ❑ Subaru dealers will take disposable cups, lids, and straws; candy and snack wrappers; and coffee and creamer capsules – yes like Keurig coffee pods. These are sent to [TerraCycle for recycling](#)..

- ❑ Batteries are recycled at hazardous waste

collection sites and some of the bigger hardware stores and battery stores recycle them too.

- ❑ Plastic tubs and containers are re-used for potting plants and starting seeds.
- ❑ Used dirt and dead leaves from house plants are emptied into the compost rather than in the trash.
- ❑ Some pet rescue organizations will take empty prescription bottles to use for their animals.
- ❑ We try not to get paper bags from the store but when we don't have enough of our own bags, we will get paper ones. We reuse them for anything we can think of!.
- ❑ Paint, cleaning products, and other chemicals are recycled at hazardous waste centers.
- ❑ We use the most compassionate ways we can find to remove insects and critters from inside the house. If we can take them out alive, all the better. The best way to remove a spider or other insect is to get a drinking glass (clear) and slowly put the glass over the spider. Then get a piece of stiff cardboard and gently slide it under the edge of the glass, being careful not to trap the spider's legs. Once the



cardboard covers the opening of the glass, hold the cardboard down tightly and carry the spider outside to be released. Feels good to save a life!

Dining Out

- ❑ Carry reusable hot & cold beverage containers and use them whenever the only other choice is a plastic or paper cup (compostable is only beneficial if it will actually be composted).
- ❑ No Straws/No Styrofoam period. I have been known to leave a restaurant that serves all food on polystyrene.
- ❑ Carry a reusable straw, silverware, and cloth napkin for use at restaurants that use plastic silverware or paper napkins.
- ❑ Take a reusable carryout container for leftovers. According to the KCMO restaurant inspector's office, as long as the customer's containers are not brought into the commercial kitchen itself, personal containers are fine. I ask that they plate our take-out on a regular plate, serve it to our table, then I put the food over into my own containers to take home..
- ❑ When we order carry-out ask (and check again when we pick it up!) to eliminate any plastic silverware, napkins, condiments, etc. that we'd normally just throw in the trash..
- ❑ Support businesses that are locally owned and that purchase food from local farmers and growers.

Transportation/Traveling

- ❑ Drive vehicles that use the least amount of fossil fuels, plan everyday trips to save miles. Note: air travel is one of the big contributors to greenhouse gases. If you can find another way to travel, you'll make a big difference..
- ❑ Bring home recycling and food waste if the hotel doesn't take care of it.
- ❑ Search for "green travel tips" on the internet – there are lots of ways to travel with a minimal footprint.
- ❑ Book hotels on [Ecosia's new travel portal](#) and plant trees with your booking.

What We Don't Do Well

- ❑ Bike/walk/use public transportation as often as possible
- ❑ My husband loves his Keurig and even though we have four reusable coffee pods, the kind you fill with your own coffee then rinse and reuse, he won't use them.
- ❑ We still bring in lots of plastic take-out containers, especially from the grocery store's prepared food sections.

Final Thoughts

All in all, I know we're making a difference.

Yes, it takes more time and it takes way more thought and planning than just putting our curbside recycling bins out and mowing a grass-covered lawn.

But there is a level of deep connection to whatever is healthiest for the planet – for this glorious Earth – that keeps me committed to doing what I can, whenever I can, in the best way I know.

What changes can you make or do you already make? Post your actions at EnviroTips #11: <https://www.theresilientactivist.org/envirotip-11-a-home-tour/>



Sami Aaron is the founder of The Resilient Activist: A Joyful, Nature-Connected Community. [Contact Sami.](#)