

# Sling Your Knickers on the Compost Heap or, Easy Ways to Live More Sustainably

by Gina Collia

We make choices every day that effect the environment, the climate and other species that share both with us. From choosing what we eat for lunch to what we eat it with, how we dispose of it and what we wear while eating it, we are making decisions routinely that have the potential to help or damage the planet that supports our very existence. Here are ten things you can do to make a positive impact on the planet and fight the climate and nature emergency.

## 1. Recycle, Reuse, Resell, Donate and Compost

Living a less consumerist lifestyle can help reduce your carbon footprint. Buy antique, vintage or secondhand rather than brand new. By avoiding buying brand new items, you'll be helping to reduce the number that are manufactured; you'll also be reducing the number that eventually need to be thrown away. Generally speaking, antique and vintage items for the home were built to last, and they're more likely to be unique, so they're likely to outlast anything you find in a modern department store.

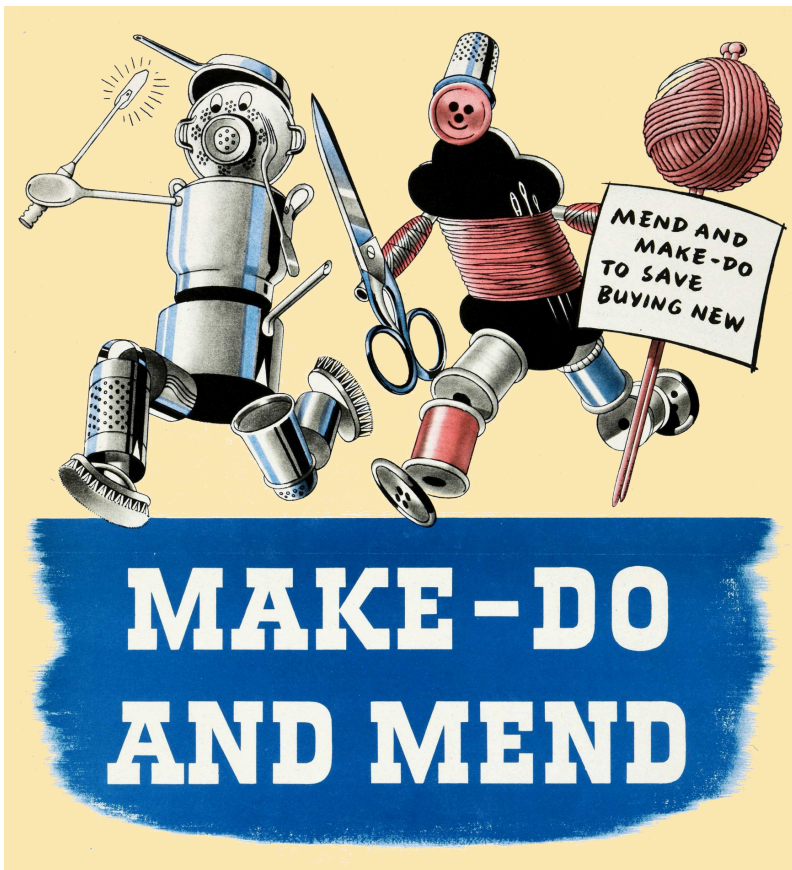
When you are about to throw something away, consider repairing, upcycling or repurposing it instead. Alternatively, if you really don't want to keep an item but it could still be put to good use, sell or donate it. One man's junk is another man's treasure.

Start a compost heap in your garden for food waste. Aside from taking all of those potato peelings and grass cuttings, your compost heap will consume your threadbare clothing if it's made from a biodegradable source, including your knickers and socks. If there's still a bit of life in your drawers, you can donate them to charity. Otherwise, remove any component that is not compostable (such as elastic), shred what remains, then add those shreds to your heap. A couple of years from now, your bloomers could be keeping your roses blooming.

## 2. Think Twice Before Buying

'Make Do and Mend' was a pamphlet issued during the Second World War by the British Ministry of Information. It provided useful tips to housewives on how to be frugal but stylish during times of rationing. If you're serious about helping the environment, make do and mend is something you should be making a return to now.

Every single day of the week, and practically every moment that you're awake throughout those days, you're being bombarded with advertisements that are trying to sell you something. But how much of what you buy do you actually need? Do you need



a new ‘phone every six months? Your current laptop works perfectly well, so do you really need to buy a new one? Do you really not have a single thing to wear? By buying what you need, rather than buying what you want/are told you want, you’ll reduce your carbon footprint and your shopping bills at the same time.

Shop your own wardrobe when you’re looking for something to wear; change the way you put an outfit together, rediscover accessories you forgot you owned, and give the online clothes shopping a miss. Our grandparents were advised during the war to unpick old

jumpers and re-knit new ones. I remember my grandmother doing this when she taught me how to knit, and it was great fun for me as a child, pulling apart my grandfather’s jumpers and unravelling the curly lengths of coloured wool. Instead of throwing out clothes the moment that they suffer some slight damage, learn to sew and knit so that you can repair them.

Rather than paying a visit to Habitat or Ikea, rearrange the items you already possess when you’re tired of your home environment and feel like a change. Redecorate pieces of furniture that are still sound but have seen better days. Add a new fabric seat or cushion here, a lick of paint there, and create a new interior by giving old things a new lease of life.

If you need a ladder for an afternoon’s climbing but you’re not likely to need one again for another year, hire or borrow it. The same goes for power tools, gardening equipment and anything else that you seldom use. Aside from reducing your carbon footprint, you’ll be accumulating less junk that needs to be stored.

### 3. Shop Locally

When you buy from large chains, produce is often transported across the country, or across the world, to reach you, creating a great deal of pollution and damaging the environment in the process. When you shop locally and buy local produce, the goods have a much shorter distance to travel, which cuts down on carbon emissions and air pollution. Also, when it comes to fresh produce, a shorter journey means less wastage. It

also means less packaging; the greater the distance the produce has to travel, the more packaging it requires to prevent it from getting damaged.

There are other benefits too. Buying from local sellers/producers means you'll have access to the freshest produce available. You'll be supporting local businesses and local jobs and boosting the local economy. And these benefits don't just apply to food; goods made locally are more likely to be unique, of better quality and designed to last longer than mass-produced items from large stores.

#### 4. Eat Sustainably

Farming animals for meat and dairy products 'creates vastly more carbon dioxide than plants such as vegetables, grains and legumes.'<sup>1</sup> Also, due to the expansion of agricultural land for animal feed production, it is one of the biggest causes of forest loss.<sup>2</sup> Switching to a plant-based, organic diet will reduce your impact on the environment. Also, reducing your meat and dairy intake, or switching to a vegetarian or vegan diet, will reduce your food bills.

In addition to moving over to a more plant-based diet, you can eat seasonally, cook in bulk and freeze leftovers. You can also try growing your own food in your garden or on an allotment. Every time you waste food, you waste the resources that went into producing it; plan your meals, be smart about your shopping and find ways to use up everything you buy.

#### 5. Be Water Wise

Water is a precious resource, and we should use it wisely to reduce environmental damage. There are a few simple things you can do to keep your water usage in check. Keep an eye on your plumbing and fix any leaks straight away. According to Thames Water, a trickling leak in your toilet can waste up to 200 litres of water each day.<sup>3</sup> Don't overfill your kettle (boiling a full kettle to get one cup of water wastes energy). Resist the urge to wash a single shirt in the washing machine (this wastes both energy and water); wait until your washing machine is full before beginning a wash cycle. Outdoors, install a water butt to catch rainwater for your garden. During times of drought, you can use bathwater or washing-up water, known as 'grey water', to water your garden, as long as you use ecological cleaning products (which you should be doing anyway). For some useful information about using grey water, *click here*.

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<sup>1</sup> World Wildlife Fund, *10 Things You Can Do to Help Save Our Planet*. <https://www.wwf.org.uk/thingsyoucando>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Which (2022), *How to save water around the home*. <https://www.which.co.uk/news/article/how-to-save-water-around-the-home-acsf0z9kUPk>

## 6. Boycott Businesses and Products that Damage the Environment

Consumer activism plays an increasingly important role in social change. Boycotts that receive national media attention ‘have about a one-in-four success rate in influencing corporate practices,’<sup>4</sup> and, according to the study *The Rise of Sustainable Media*, prepared by Dentsu and Microsoft Advertising, ‘59% of consumers [are] prepared to force change by boycotting businesses seen as failing to prioritize the environment within 12 months.’<sup>5</sup> So, refuse to work with companies, and boycott products, that damage the environment and endanger wildlife. Take to social media and spread information about offending companies; scream it from the rooftops until those companies change their objectionable corporate practices. And support companies that take real action to address climate change (remembering to scrutinise claims in order to see through the greenwashing).

## 7. Travel Responsibly

One of the easiest ways to reduce your carbon footprint is to travel responsibly. This means considering alternatives when travelling and choosing a more sustainable way to reach your destination. Walk, cycle or use public transport rather than taking your car, and holiday closer to home to avoid flying. Consider virtual business meetings rather than face-to-face ones to avoid travel that will damage the environment. After all, the pandemic has given us all the chance to see just how well we work away from the office. For the climate, flying is the most damaging way to travel, and, according to European non-governmental organisation (NGO) Transport & Environment, just ‘1% percent of people cause half of all aviation emissions... and many of these trips are business-related.’<sup>6</sup> A return flight from London to San Francisco emits ‘more than twice the emissions produced by a family car in a year.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Roser-Renouf, Connie, Maibach, Edward and Leiserowitz, Anthony (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication 2016), *Consumer Activism on Global Warming*. <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/consumer-activism-global-warming/>

<sup>5</sup> Glenday, John (2021), *59% of consumers say they'll boycott brands that don't address climate emergency*. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2021/12/07/59-consumers-say-they-ll-boycott-brands-don-t-address-climate-emergency>

<sup>6</sup> Scorr, Mike (Reuters 2022), *Can business travel get into a more sustainable flight-path post-Covid?* <https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/can-business-travel-get-into-more-sustainable-flight-path-post-covid-2022-07-15/>

<sup>7</sup> Timperley, Jocelyn (BBC 2020), *Should we give up flying for the sake of the climate?* <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200218-climate-change-how-to-cut-your-carbon-emissions-when-flying>

## 8. Choose Renewable Energy and Be More Energy Efficient

‘According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 99 percent of people in the world breathe air that exceeds air quality limits and threatens their health, and more than 13 million deaths around the world each year are due to avoidable environmental causes, including air pollution.’<sup>8</sup>

Fossil fuels, such as coal, oil and gas account for ‘over 75 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions.’<sup>9</sup> By switching to clean sources of energy, such as wind and solar, you will have a positive impact on both climate change and air quality.

A properly draught-proofed and insulated home helps you reduce your CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and energy demands, helping the environment and saving you money on energy bills at the same time. Check for draughts around windows and doors, and don’t forget to seal gaps between floorboards and under skirting boards. Also, don’t forget to close all of your curtains and blinds at night to keep the cold out.

## 9. Do Away with Chemicals in the Garden

Various chemicals are used in urban and agricultural environments to kill pests, diseases and weeds. But many insecticides, herbicides and fungicides also harm pollinators and other beneficial insects. ‘More than three-quarters of the UK’s butterflies have declined in the last 40 years and evidence suggests that neonicotinoid pesticides, in particular, are one of the causes of these declines.’<sup>10</sup>

Pollinators pollinate our fruit, vegetables and flowers, and without them we would have none of these things; we need these precious creatures, and we should be protecting them, not killing them. Also, beneficial insects can help keep harmful insects under control (a single ladybird can eat up to 5,000 aphids in its lifetime), so they are your friends in the garden. Add plants that attract beneficial insects to your garden, and let them do the work. Make your garden an attractive place for birds, hedgehogs and toads, and they’ll take care of your slugs. Also, you can buy nematodes that kill unwanted pests without harming beneficial insects. And you can make non-toxic homemade remedies to deal with diseases (there are numerous recipes available online).

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations, *Renewable energy – powering a safer future*. <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/raising-ambition/renewable-energy>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Butterfly Conservation (2022), *10 easy ways you can help our environment*. <https://butterfly-conservation.org/news-and-blog/10-easy-ways-you-can-help-our-environment>

## 10. Avoid Peat-Based Composts

Did you know that ‘our planet's 10 billion acres of peat hold more carbon than all the world’s forests combined’?<sup>11</sup>

Healthy peatlands have a net cooling effect on climate (locking in vast quantities of carbon), provide valuable ecosystems for plants and animals, and reduce the risk of flooding. They ‘can help to offset the effects of human activities such as fossil fuel burning that are raising CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere, leading to climate change.’<sup>12</sup> However, about 80% of the UK’s peatlands have been negatively impacted by human activity: they’ve been drained and ploughed for agriculture or mined for peat for use in gardening and horticulture.<sup>13</sup> As a result, they’re not just failing to capture CO<sub>2</sub>, they are releasing vast amounts of it into the atmosphere.

The sale of peat-based composts for use in household gardens will be banned in England from 2024, but there’s no reason to wait until then to reduce your carbon footprint.

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<sup>11</sup> Royal Horticultural Society, *Peat-free gardening*. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/peat>

<sup>12</sup> UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (2019), *Human activity means UK peatlands contribute to climate change*. <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/news-and-media/news/human-activity-means-uk-peatlands-contribute-climate-change>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.