

CLIMATE COACH

Seven easy climate actions that I learned many people aren't doing

Bidets, bar shampoo and bug zappers: The year's best tips



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Against the enormity of climate change, it's easy to see individual efforts as futile.

But tiny acts add up.

Not only do we profoundly influence friends and family, our actions and example act as [billboards advertising social norms](#). We have the power to change what's "normal." Just look at [why your neighbors install solar panels](#).

Happily, I've found many things that are not only good for the planet, they make your life better. Based on the response to this column over the past year, millions of you want to do more in your own life about climate change.

Here are seven things I discovered in 2023 that can make a difference in your new year.

Lentils are the most underrated protein.

I once underestimated lentils and the rest of the legume family. Who among us hasn't pushed away a bowl of mushy brown lentils?

But I was wrong. It wasn't lentils. It was me — at least how I was making them.

From rich, velvety black “beluga” lentils to speckled, dark green French Puy and light green Lairds, legumes can shine in every meal. They pair well with meat, or can replace it as the star of the show. I've served them at breakfast (with a dollop of yogurt) and even in brownies (for the truly devoted). In my home, they are the perfect Sunday night meal — one that can last all week, with recipes proving a hit with vegetarians, omnivores and dedicated carnivores.

And you'll be building your body and the soil as you eat. Legumes rejuvenate soil, and generally don't require irrigation or carbon-intensive nitrogen fertilizers. Each serving packs enough vitamins, minerals and iron to give meat a run for its money.

So dig in. In my kitchen, red wine braised lentils are now in regular rotation. You can search nearly 100 lentil recipes here.

Pre-rinsing dishes is pointless.

Appliance folklore remains stuck in the 1970s. Manufacturers have finally designed household machines that work better than humans.

So this year, I handed over the job to them.

No more prewashing dishes before putting them in the dishwasher: Scraping is good enough for almost every mess. Powerful jets, heat and detergent in modern dishwashers can do the job well with little water (three gallons for an entire load), while generating less than half the greenhouse gas emissions compared to washing by hand. Bonus: You save 230 hours, equivalent to a 10-day vacation, compared to hand-washing over a year.

The same applies to other household machines. Set smart thermostats and forget them. Software can now maximize efficiency while learning your preferences, whether it's in your fridge or heater. Washing clothes in cold water cleans the vast majority of laundry. If you're renting or don't want to replace your range, affordable portable induction burners and countertop convection ovens can handle most of your cooking.

What happens when appliances reach the end of the road? I don't keep them on life support after a decade or two. Recycling ancient appliances lowers your emissions and energy bill, even after considering the manufacturing, says the nonprofit research organization American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy. Plus you get cleaner clothes and dishes. To recycle appliances, ask retailers, utilities and local governments about their take-back programs.

Bar shampoo is better.

Soaps. Conditioners. Shaving creams. Laundry detergent. Most are just expensive water. Companies love to sell you enormous plastic bottles of these personal and cleaning products because it's convenient and profitable — for them.

But faced with a tsunami of plastic waste, and possible regulation, some companies are starting to offer an entire array of concentrated products. You just add the water.

This year, I swapped out most of my products for concentrates, powders and tablets. I now use a bar shampoo and conditioner. It's as soft and nourishing as any liquid product I've used in the past, not at all like washing your hair with bar soap. My toothpaste is now a simple tablet. My cleaning products are all concentrates I refill (Blueand, Meliora and Sustainabar are good options for a variety of products).

Will ditching plastic bottles in my bathroom save the world? No. But I prefer to buy what I need, not ship water and packaging I do not, and contribute to the transition away from single-use plastics.

As a result, my world is cleaner, inside and out.

Bidets beat toilet paper any day.

The bidet remains mysterious to many Americans. But billions of people around the world can attest to the superiority of spritzing your bum over wadding up bits of paper. It's more hygienic, less wasteful and does the job better.

Americans are finally catching on. Since the pandemic, the popularity of this bathroom fixture has exploded. Bidets that attach to an existing toilet are priced around \$30, within reach of almost every American. Or if you're like DJ Khaled, you can spring for this porcelain throne for \$21,181.

Bidets cut household consumption of toilet paper by about 80 percent. For what you do buy, explore your options. "UltraSoft" rolls are made from mature or old-growth trees pulped for their longer fibers. Everything from bamboo to recycled tissue is just as good. My personal favorite delivers, or you can check the NRDC's tissue scorecard for the top brands.

Did anyone in my household notice the switch? Only to say the new brand was better than the old stuff.

Your sweater can be forever

I wanted to have a better relationship with my things. So much stuff ends up in the landfill or recesses of the closet. A better way must exist.

First, I learned, I needed to come to grips with how I feel about my stuff. Our possessions, especially clothes, serve as extensions of identities, even our values. Our emotional connection to them is what determines their value.

To build a wardrobe that will last a decade (or more), I stopped only looking at how long a garment could remain wearable or fashionable. Clothes often become obsolete in the mind of the buyer long before any materials wear out. By finding and cultivating pieces meaningful to me, I can create what Jonathan Chapman, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Design, calls emotional durability. "We are consumers of meaning not matter," he writes.

Now I can expect my clothes to last (almost) forever.

One of the best things you can do for nature is pay attention to it

This year, I really started to pay attention to my wild neighbors.

With the help of the bird ID app Merlin, I tuned my ear to the calls of white-crowned sparrows and California towhees. The once anonymous green blur of weeds, flowers and trees resolved into Monterey pines, wall barley and rock roses using Seek and PlantNet identifying species with photos and videos.

I discovered you can identify almost every flower, plant and tree around you with four free apps developed by scientists. (Avoid the paid ones.) It's like magic. Within weeks, I was on a first-name basis with my wild neighbors. Time slowed down. Seasons were richer. I experienced the ebb and flow as animals arrived in the spring or left for warmer climes in the fall.

Is this good for you? Study after study has found time spent in or around nature — even through a window — can improve our mental and physical health.

Is it good for nature? The natural world depends on it. Yet our connection to nature is fading with each passing generation. Fewer and fewer people grow up experiencing our wild world.

This generational amnesia of the natural world as species decline or die off, has a name: shifting baselines. Its acceptance is unraveling what has made our world capable of withstanding these shocks in the first place: fighting the loss of the rich tapestry of species.

An essential way to preserve our baselines, scientists acknowledge, is telling stories. We need to remember all the species that filled our world and could once again.

That's why I tell my son about vanishing fireflies — and share my wild relationships with the people around me.

Bug zappers don't work. At all.

Stop using bug zappers. They don't work. The devices have no discernible impact on mosquitoes or biting insects, while killing an estimated 70 billion or more insects each year, most of them beneficial. Traps, fans, clothing and repellents do the job well.

Enjoy the butterflies and bees.