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Home Is Where 'Green' Can Start

By Amy Hoak
From MarketWatch

Consumers are bombarded these days with a multitude of suggestions to make their lives "greener." Many proposed changes start at home.

That's not a bad idea: The government estimates that the energy Americans use just to run their homes makes up 21% of total energy use throughout the country. And that statistic doesn't even touch on the other environmental issues that can be addressed in a home, including water conservation and indoor air quality.

To make homes friendlier to the environment and cleaner to the people who live in them, manufacturers have been busy refining their home products. At the recent International Builders' Show, green products were everywhere.

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"When you go shopping now, it's not even a buzzword anymore -- it's expected," says Calli Schmidt, a spokeswoman for the National Association of Home Builders, referring to the "green" labeling of products. The NAHB sponsored the show.

Despite the many substantial investments that can make a home greener, smaller incremental changes often do count, Ms. Schmidt

says.

For example, the federal Energy Star program claims that the country would save \$600 million in energy costs annually -- or enough to light three million homes for a year -- if every household in the U.S. changed one light bulb to an Energy Star compact fluorescent light bulb.

Properly insulating a home is another way to increase its energy efficiency.

Those interested in doing more might consider upgrading their homes with these five products:

- **Washers that save energy and water.** The newest washers are front loading, with features that use less water to clean clothes. Whirlpool, for example, has a washer that uses steam technology to save 73% of the water and 77% of the energy used by top-load washers manufactured only four years ago. A spin speed cycle is able to extract more water from clothes, cutting down on dryer time. Dishwashers are benefiting from steam technology too. The KitchenAid Steam Option dishwasher saves about 2,400 gallons of water over the life of the appliance.

- **Toilets that conserve water.** In many homes, toilets are the biggest water users. To save water in the bathroom, manufactures are developing toilets that use less per flush.

Kohler has a Dual Force model under its Sterling brand that has two buttons on its tank: One allows 1.6 gallons for a "bulk" flush and another allows 0.8 gallons for "light waste" and liquid. Other single-flush toilets manage to use 20% less water than a traditional toilet, says Rob Zimmerman, senior staff engineer of water conservation initiatives at Kohler.

- **No-VOC paints.** Typically paints have contained some amount of volatile organic compounds. Today's paints often have low amounts of the gasses that hurt a home's indoor air quality, but a new product introduced at the builders' show contains no VOCs at all.

The Freshaire Choice line of paints is being offered at Home Depot stores. It claims to have no VOCs in the base or the tint, and the paint comes in recycled packaging. Generally, there has been an increasing awareness that poor indoor air quality can affect a family's health, says Deborah Jones Barrow, founder of TheDailyGreen.com, a Web site that offers suggestions for green living.

- **Smart thermostat applications.** Programmable thermostats are often touted as a way to keep energy costs down. The only problem is, many times consumers use them incorrectly.

But online computer programs, such as a new system from In2 Networks that works with Honeywell thermostats, allow consumers to monitor heating and cooling consumption and control settings from their computers. The In2 Networks system can show homeowners the difference a couple of degrees could make, both in terms of dollars and the home's carbon footprint.

- **Low-flow faucets and showerheads.** The latest versions of low-flow faucets and showerheads perform a lot better than their older counterparts, and homeowners who wouldn't sacrifice their hand washing or shower experiences for water conservation are giving these products a second look. Delta says it has a Water-Efficient Showerhead with H2Okinetic Technology, a product that creates larger water droplets and provides a more drenching spray.

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