

The oil habit



Hi. My name is Elizabeth, and I'm addicted to oil. Is there a 12-step program out there for me? Not exactly. Even if there were, kicking the habit would be a daunting task. Oil is just way too useful. Its byproducts are almost everywhere, and my daily life practically oozes petroleum.

To rid myself of products tied to oil and its carbon cousin, natural gas, I would have to pull up my carpet and pitch my cosmetics. My premium-gas-gulping car would get the heave-ho. So would the chemicals that keep my pool clean. And much, much more.

In my bathroom alone, there's my toothbrush and toothpaste, plus shampoo and other hair products, hand cream, face lotions, nail polish, rubbing alcohol, bandages, deodorant, contact lens cases and solutions, brushes, combs, plastic pill containers, throw rugs, razors, paint on the walls, finish on the fake wood cabinets, the plastic toilet seat, plastic parts in the toilet, shower head and shower door, caulking, drain stoppers and so on.

The raw, black, goeey stuff is not what's omnipresent. Instead, it's chemicals derived from oil and natural gas that bring us adhesives, medicines, inks, plastic resins, synthetic rubber, nylon, detergents and the like.

So why bother curbing my craving for crude? Because the price has soared, boosting the cost of what I

do and consume. And fossil fuels are finite, produce greenhouse gases and leave a toxic trail.

Recovering from this addiction is going to be tough. Still, it's not hopeless.

March 30, 2008

— Elizabeth Douglass – Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

THE BATHROOM

Flush with ideas to cut down on oil use

March 28, 2008

— Elizabeth Douglass – Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

My bathroom is a key area in my crude-reduction quest. All manner of petroleum- and natural gas-derived soaps, lotions, perfumes, medicine, plastic bottles and instruments of hygiene (nail files, toothbrushes, etc.) cycle through there regularly.

"The extent to which oil and gas is involved in everything is breathtaking," Post-Carbon Institute President Julian Darley said.

I find that especially true in my bathroom.

Let's consider aspirin. The little pills are oil byproducts, according to the American Chemistry Council. Aspirin is derived from salicylic acid, which is derived from sodium phenolate, which is derived from phenol, which is derived from cumene, which is derived from benzene and propylene, both of which are derived from petroleum.

No matter. I'm not giving up *that*.

Until the next remodeling project, the infrastructure here is set. Whatever petrochemicals went into the production of my floor tile, shower and cabinets have already been consumed. The same goes for the sealants covering them. Instead, my purchasing habits are the focus.

These days, there's plenty from which to choose. The push for organic products has been building for decades, so now you can easily find shampoo, toothpaste, gels, hair spray, lotions, cosmetics and sunscreen, as well as cotton balls and swabs, without dyes and other chemicals.

Words such as "green," "natural" and so forth can be helpful cues, but only a few of those terms are strictly defined and regulated, so check the ingredients.

It's instructive that this month, the Organic Consumers Assn. reported that it tested 100 "natural" and "organic" products, and nearly half contained a cancer-causing chemical that is a byproduct of petrochemicals used in manufacturing.

The same caveats apply to the containers. But if the label is silent on the makeup of the plastic bottles and packaging, you can be sure they're not petroleum-free.

I browsed EnvironGentle, a store near my house that calls itself "Earth friendly," and I found several things I'm going to try when my current stocks run out.

Some of the items cost more, but many are on par with, or cheaper than, similar items sold at stores such as Crabtree & Evelyn.

For \$15, I could buy 32 ounces of Dr. Bronner's organic all-purpose lavender liquid soap packaged in a recycled plastic bottle. The label carries religious messages, which might not appeal to everyone, but it's a bonus that the company is local, based in San Diego County. At the Body Shop's online store, an 8.4-ounce bottle of Relaxing Lavender Body Wash costs \$13.

THE KITCHEN

Changing habits to cut oil use -- one step at a time

From energy-hog major appliances to plastic grocery bags, it all adds up.

By Elizabeth Douglass, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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There's a lot of action in any kitchen, so it's a good place to start changing habits and chipping away at petroleum use.

The big-ticket items are the appliances.

Refrigerators, dishwashers, ovens, microwaves and stoves all consume energy, and that power often involves a fossil fuel of some sort -- so I count using less power as cutting back on my oil/natural gas addiction. The machines that came with our 19-year-old tract house have pooped out and been replaced with more energy-efficient versions. Our stove is the exception; it's old and uses natural gas.

I can't feel smug, though, because the river of petroleum-based products that flows through our kitchen easily offsets those gains and would probably get us an F rating from green gurus such as actor and author Ed Begley Jr.

Let's start with our worst sin: those plastic grocery bags.

My husband does the food shopping. He brings everything home in them, and then, like clockwork, throws them in the trash. I retrieve them for recycling, but we're still among those who together consume 12 million barrels' worth of oil in plastic bags each year in this country, said Crissy Trask, author of ["It's Easy Being Green."](#)

In my house, however, plastic-bag policy is not my call. My husband, who does many other good things for the environment, can't bring himself to tote around the totes. To maintain household harmony and avoid the disaster that would ensue if I took over grocery shopping and cooking, that change will have to wait.

I feel better knowing that Begley and his wife, Rachelle, readily admit to friendly friction over certain habits and products that she is not willing to give up.

"I try to be very understanding," Begley told me. "You don't run up Mt. Everest. You get to base camp,

and you get acclimated . . . and not everybody's going to make it to the summit."

Next up, plastic water bottles.

I thought it helped that I refilled the bottles with filtered tap water for as long as I could before tossing them in the recycling bin and buying a new case. But that wasn't nearly enough. And to make matters worse, my husband now drinks those vitamin waters, which end up being single-use items because the flavoring sticks to the bottles.

To nix bottled water at home, I needed containers that were easy to carry, refillable and dishwasher-safe. Trask suggested substitutes by Klean Kanteen, Sigg or CamelBak (sold online or at sports stores such as REI). A pair of 18-ounce Klean Kanteen stainless steel bottles costs \$31. A single 20-ounce Sigg bottle, aluminum with your choice of colorful designs, was about \$20.

But I like to keep six or more bottles filled, refrigerator-chilled and ready to go, so the upfront outlay for stainless steel seemed a bit steep for my purposes. Instead, I went with CamelBak's half-liter plastic Better Bottle with Classic Cap, sold by SummitHut.com for \$8 each. The reusable bottle is the right size, dishwasher-safe and free of bisphenol A, a plastics chemical some believe is a health hazard.

Other steps: We can shun superfluous plastic packaging, buy things made from recycled plastic and use sandwich bags and dish soaps that aren't petroleum-based. We also can try harder to buy locally produced food and in bulk. That chips away at the fuel use involved in moving food around.

It's a start.

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OTHER ROOMS

A power switch and paper trims

March 30, 2008

— Elizabeth Douglass – Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Now for the rest of the house.

I deserve a big fat "F" in my home office, mostly because I print out almost everything I need to read so that I can underline important passages or carry the papers around.

That makes me a big consumer of petroleum-derived inks and a big paper waster too, even though I often print on the back of pages I'm done with.

That will stop. I promise.

I also waste power, which in California usually translates into wasting natural gas.

As suggested by nearly everyone who writes about this stuff, I'll reorganize the hordes of plugs -- the ones for the computer, all-in-one printer, cable modem, wireless LAN router and the mini television turned to CNBC -- onto one or two power strips. That way, I can turn them off in bunches at the end of the day.

On the plus side, my computer monitor is an energy-saving flat-panel LCD, my wireless mouse is outfitted with rechargeable batteries and my fancy Herman Miller Mirra office chair is certified as complying with the [Cradle-to-Cradle Design Protocol](#) developed by William McDonough and Michael Braungart.

The concept -- sometimes shortened to just C2C -- requires companies to use the least harmful chemicals and materials in their products and design them so they can be disassembled and recycled into something else.

My chair was made from 42% recycled materials, and as much as 96% of its components are recyclable. It contains no polyvinyl chloride, also known as PVC, and the molded polymer back can be recycled as many as 25 times, according to a two-page Mirra chair fact sheet. Wow.

When I paid \$700 for it in 2004, I thought it was just another expensive but crucially comfortable office chair. I had a feeling my Mirra chair was special when I saw one at the desk of actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr., author of "Living Like Ed: A Guide to the Eco-Friendly Life."

Now I know to look for products with C2C certification.

As Begley likes to say: "If you're not buying recycled, you're not recycling."

Carpet is pervasive in our house, and when we replaced it last year, we bought a nylon-fiber type made by Royalty Carpet Mills Inc. The mill uses 90% reclaimed water and is based in Irvine, so I awarded myself mini-points for saving water and reducing the fuel needed to deliver the rolls. But from a petro-addiction standpoint, it was a big gulp from the barrel because our selection didn't contain any recycled material.

We have an [Energy Star](#) clothes washer. (The federal government's rating program doesn't test dryers, and unfortunately, ours doesn't have an energy-saving moisture sensor.) The majority of our light fixtures sport energy-saving compact fluorescent bulbs.

Our fireplace came with a natural gas line, but last winter we used Duraflame logs instead -- the kind that gives off less bad stuff than wood and includes "all natural ingredients. No petro-chemicals."

I'm ashamed to say that in our living room we have a 42-inch plasma flat-screen TV -- a monster energy waster. Oops. But my husband and I are sports fiends and that's a luxury we aren't likely to give up.

An LCD screen uses much less energy, but I'm not springing for one now. After all, I'm a journalist and not made of money.

Overall, though, we're not as bad off as I thought. There are several things we can do now to further reduce my oil jones. We'll ponder the big stuff too.

I figure the most important concept is in my head for good: Buy less and use less. If we do that well enough, we could switch to a 35-gallon trash container from our 95-gallon beast -- that would save us more than \$6 a month in trash collection fees.

THE GARAGE

Garage presents the worst oil picture

There is the fuel demand of three cars and the place is loaded with plastic, all made from oil.

March 30, 2008

— Elizabeth Douglass, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

The garage is home to our most profligate petroleum users. No, we don't have a set of gas-guzzling SUVs, but we do have three cars.

Inside, there's a 1995 Mazda Miata (our fun convertible), a 2001 Acura TL sedan (mine) and a 2003 Chrysler PT Cruiser Turbo (my husband's wheels). Nothing helpful on the fuel-efficiency front. On the other hand, our mileage is probably below that of many dual-income households -- especially for Southern California.

The Miata rarely moves. The PT has a round-trip commute of 10 miles. I work at home several days a week, a zero-mile commute.

On the other days, I usually take an Amtrak or Metrolink train for the 110-mile trip to downtown Los Angeles, then a shuttle bus to the office.

We're pretty boring, so our non-work travel is mostly limited to errands, which we try to plot roughly to save time and fuel. We have an air compressor handy for properly inflated tires (a fuel-saver). And we'll see if our cars can go 5,000 miles between oil changes instead of the commonly recommended 3,000 miles. (Many cars can; check your owners manual.)

Until one of the chariots has to be replaced, that's the best we can do on the vehicle front.

Nearby, I spot the gas-powered lawn mower and figure I'll press for an electric version when that one dies. Because I'm not doing the mowing, I don't have standing to push for one with no engine at all.

Other garage items with links to petroleum: plastic storage bins and cabinets, plastic tool boxes, plastic-handled tools, plastic watering jugs, plastic-coated wire shelving, plastic garbage cans, plastic cat carrier and so on. When it's time to replace that stuff, I'll search for substitutes on California's recycled products directory (www.ciwmb.ca.gov/RCP/) and other Internet sites.

For now, I'm not going to discuss a certain person's favorite gardening and car-cleaning products, or the multiple sets of golf clubs with plastic employed here and there. He gets credit for using biodegradable tees and being a good water steward (that must count for something on the green karma scale). In return, I hope to get some slack on the plastic bags that arrive daily, protecting my cherished newspapers from sprinklers, rain and such. Bags and newspapers go in the recycling bin.

We don't have air conditioning, but our furnace is old and we'll need to replace it soon, so I'll look for an energy-saving replacement. Same with our water heater. During a tour Monday of his Studio City house, actor/environmentalist Ed Begley Jr. showed me his solar hot water heater, which was being replaced that day after nearly 20 years of service.

When I told him I might be in the market soon, he pointed to his backup, a super-efficient gas water heater made by A.O. Smith. As Begley knows, going the solar route isn't cheap, even with subsidies, and I would still need a standard water heater to back up the solar unit.

As for the cleaning products and pest-killers we've amassed in the garage, I've already found some less-toxic things to try, but it's unclear how much petroleum consumption I'll wipe out in the switch.

Companies such as Seventh Generation sell organic cleaners, but given the properties inherent in any effective cleaner, they're mostly packaged in standard plastic bottles. Begley's Best, a line of natural cleaners sold by Begley, is no exception.

"People have suggested I use a corn-based polymer, but I want to test it first since I have a lot of citrus in my formula," Begley said. A corn-based bottle is biodegradable, he noted, "and I don't want it to break down on the shelf."

I'm good with that.

CRUDE OIL IS USED EVERYWHERE!!

'I try to use things as long as I possibly can'

Q & A with actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr.

March 28, 2008

— Elizabeth Douglass — Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr. was barely out of his teens in 1970 when he took part in the nation's first Earth Day celebration and got his first electric car. He's had five more since then, plus a hybrid here and there and a natural gas vehicle.

Begley, 58, is a well-known veteran in the acting world, having appeared in television shows and movies as diverse as "Happy Days," "St. Elsewhere" and "Batman Forever."

But in 1990, Begley changed course. It was the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, he said, and "I wanted to up the ante. I wanted to do more."

Since then, he's become almost as famous for his environmental commitment and causes. Many remember him riding his bicycle to the Oscars. For a while, Begley's devotion triggered a cross between amusement and derision among the public and his peers. But, it turns out, he was just ahead of the pack.

Friends now seek his advice on how to make their homes and lives more green. He sometimes gives media and guest tours of his Studio City home, which is electrically self-sufficient, sporting solar-electric and wind power that gets stored in batteries for use at night and on overcast days. There's a solar water heater, a small solar oven, a fruit and vegetable garden and a patch of lawn made mostly from recycled tires.

For two seasons, the HGTV cable network ran "Living With Ed," a reality series based on Begley's green principles, and he's just published a companion book, "Living Like Ed," that includes sometimes-sarcastic commentary from his wife, actress Rachelle Carson.

In an interview -- preceded by a tour of his house -- Begley discussed how and why others should follow his lead.

What role does petroleum play in modern life in general and in your life?

It's everywhere. You can't get away from it. I need it for my eyeglasses. We need it for medical supplies. I'm not a Luddite. I have a cellphone, and a computer and a fax machine and the things that I feel I need to live a modern life and to spread the word about things that I think are important. I think it's a question of eliminating it as best you can, in every way that you can.

Plastic is pervasive, with grocery bags and bottles of all kinds. How do you cut back?

I stopped buying bottled water. I never really liked it much, but Rachelle liked it, so I bought it. She liked it for hikes and what have you. I won her over to the idea of just a refillable thing. We have a water filter on the sink that works very well. In the 1970s, I stopped taking paper or plastic bags at the market. You hand

them canvas bags and they're happy to use them.

What about all the other plastic bottles?

That's more challenging. Even the wonderful Seventh Generation products, laundry soaps and what have you that are nontoxic, they're still going to come in HDPE, high-density polyethylene bottles. The best you can do with that is recycle that HDPE so it can have another life. It can be made into somebody's fence or hopefully into another bottle.

How difficult is it to make those changes when you're not the only one in your house -- when part of your sales job has to be aimed at your own family?

I think it's a real issue. I think we're doing pretty well with it. I try to be very understanding. My wife is -- and she will tell you this -- she's something of a consumer; she gets pleasure out of shopping. I get no pleasure out of shopping. I try to use things as long as I possibly can.

It's kind of intimidating to see all that you've done -- and it's quite expensive, right?

I started doing this 38 years ago. It's been a long journey to do all this stuff. Not everybody's going to be able to afford solar electric. Not everybody's going to be able to afford a hybrid or an electric car like I have. In 1970, when I started this journey, I couldn't afford solar electric, that took me 20 years to be able to afford that. But I did a lot of stuff on a very modest budget in 1970, and I learned, much to my surprise, that I was saving money doing it.

What do you tell people when they ask you how to get started?

~~~ End OF L. A. Times Articles ~~~

***Jack Muellerleile\* Comment: While all of the above research was presumably conducted in order to competently write the articles for the Los Angeles Times newspaper, conclusions which are obvious to me include the following:***

- 1. L. A. Times readers should begin to realize that crude oil is a lot more important to us than most people ever understood;***
- 2. Our citizenry should demand that their elected representatives pull their heads out of the sand when it comes to laws and regulatory practices affecting our Exploration & Production efforts locating and recovering additional barrels of crude oil from U. S. owned or controlled territory;***
- 3. Oil companies will make a MUCH BETTER RETURN ON THEIR INVESTMENT when a lot less of the barrel of crude oil must be used to manufacture fuels so they have a disincentive to artificially boost consumer demand for same;***
- 4. Folks seeking a safe, reliable, long term investment could do a lot worse than buying shares of any fully integrated major oil company's stock.***

\* Jack Muellerleile is a 40 year veteran of the oil business including 23 years on the payroll of Mobil oil Corp.