

# Simple Steps to Help the Environment

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Many people love nature. Actions, such as picking up trash and reducing energy usage, are great ways to help neighborhoods and the planet. Folks may be shocked to learn that some of their other activities are akin to loving nature to death. This non-technical article shows ways that people can improve their behaviors while helping the environment and community. Let's walk that path to redemption!

- **Leave no trace.** It's as simple as that. When visiting natural areas, nobody afterwards should know you were there. Respect nature. Most parks have rules that forbid disturbing animals, plants, and even deadwood, leaf litter, soil, or stones. If you already dumped or otherwise encroached on public land, clean it up and properly dispose of that junk and debris. It's the right thing to do. More is at <https://lnt.org/> and <https://americanhiking.org/resources/leave-no-trace/>.
- **Stay on official park trails.** When visiting natural areas, never stomp new routes or continue using unauthorized paths. With many factors to consider, new trail design and approval must go through park management. Some resources:
  - <https://www.wta.org/news/signpost/7-signs-your-trail-is-in-trouble-what-to-do-about-it>
  - [https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/idkt\\_bootbrush.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/idkt_bootbrush.htm)
- **Place your trash into garbage cans or recycle bins.** When no receptacles are present, you bring it in, you carry it out, including tissues, cigarette butts, food and drink containers, fishing gear, and diapers. If you drop something, pick it up. Even better, pick up trash on your walk and make a positive impact.
- **Clean up after your pet—and you!** Leaving dog or human poop is gross, unsanitary, and detrimental to the environment. <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/soil-water-conservation/dog-waste-scoop-poop/>
- **Keep pets on leash.** Set a good example and follow the law, [§ 41.1-2-4](#). <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/code/animals-and-pets>
- **Recycle correctly.** The rules changed over time and have regional differences across the nation. In Fairfax County, single-stream recycling is where the following materials are collected in a single bin and sorted later at the processing facility. Here, single-stream recycling accepts **loose**:
  - Plastic #1 and #2 bottles, jugs, and jars only. The neck must be narrow. Other plastics such as yogurt containers, cups, and clamshells should go to household trash.
  - Aluminum and iron-based food and beverage cans.
  - Flattened cardboard and clean paper.
  - Cartons.

-Plastic bags and film #4 clog single-stream recycling but can enter a segregated recycling flow, starting at supermarket collection sites. <https://nextrex.com/>

-Glass is another material that enters a segregated recycling flow at purple bin locations. <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/recycling-trash/glass>

-When in doubt, keep it out.

-Help recycling thrive, ditch the filthy five:

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/sites/publicworks/files/assets/documents/pdf/publications/filthy-five-factsheet.pdf>.

-Illustrated recycling resources are at

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/sites/publicworks/files/assets/documents/pdf/publications/always-never-flyer.pdf>.

- Leave the leaves. Keep those autumn leaves for wildlife, garden mulch, and soil nutrition. <https://www.nwf.org/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2015/OctNov/Gardening/Leave-the-Leaves>
  - Use curbside recycling for woody branches and vegetable garden husks. Have this debris tied with biodegradable rope, placed in compostable paper lawn bags, or in a reusable container marked "Yard Debris" but not in plastic bags or tied with nylon twine. More tips are at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/recycling-trash/yard-waste>
- Keep wildlife wild. Never feed or disturb wildlife. Details are at <https://www.fws.gov/story/2015-01/keep-wild-wildlife-dont-touch-or-feed> and <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/wildlife-services/dont-feed-wildlife>
- When a vehicle is parked, turn off the engine. In general, leaving an engine idling for long periods is bad for it and contributes to air pollution. <https://despairrepair.com/long-idling-5-most-common-questions-and-answers/>
- Discontinue using synthetic lawn chemicals. Best place to dispose of them is the Household Hazardous Waste collection at the I66 Transfer Station. In the long run, organic gardening has lasting benefits <https://gardenmadesimple.com/benefits-of-using-organic-fertilizer/>.
  - Before adding any soil amendments, don't guess, soil test! Quick, easy, and inexpensive soil testing is at <https://www.soiltest.vt.edu/>
  - Problems with overusing lawn chemicals: [https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/marc\\_lawnchemicals.pdf](https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/marc_lawnchemicals.pdf)
  - Depending on the type and exposure, pesticides and herbicides can be harmful to people, pets, and the environment. A good summary is at <https://extension.psu.edu/potential-health-effects-of-pesticides>. Too many toxicology studies only look at the active ingredients, but the "other ingredients" may contain chemicals that can also be harmful even though those substances are not listed. <http://npic.orst.edu/factsheets/inerts.html>
- Remove invasive plants from your yard. Doing so is key to a healthy environment. It is more important than planting natives because those invasive weeds generate seeds that spread to neighbors and natural areas, thereby overwhelm native populations. Find out more about the Mid-Atlantic's worst plant invaders and how to spot them at:
  - <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/invasive-species/recognize>
  - [www.invasive.org/midatlantic/fieldguide/index.cfm](http://www.invasive.org/midatlantic/fieldguide/index.cfm)
  - Join an Invasive Management Area workday and pull those invasive targets first hand: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/invasive-management-area>
- Learn to identify plants. It is key to telling native friends from invasive foes. Plant knowledge helps people become more connected to nature and saves time when deciding to pull or keep that garden plant. Start with a few plant names and keep building those lists and identification techniques. Include trees, shrubs, vines, grasses, and leafy ones that die back every year. Here are some of the many resources at varying skill levels:
  - The Green Spring Gardens Park horticultural library <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/greenspring>
  - <https://diynatural.com/plant-identification-tips/>
  - <https://nature-mentor.com/plant-identification-cheat-sheet/>
  - <https://vnps.org/potowmack/>

- Buy native plants at sales and study your own specimens:  
<https://vnps.org/native-plant-sales/>
- Check out your local bookstore and see which hard copies are a good fit for you!
- Join a volunteer workday! Many sanctioned activities help the community and natural areas—  
from watershed cleanups to habitat restoration and more! <https://www.volunteerfairfax.org/>

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