**Things to do and try this month**

Here are our top tips for the month to help you embrace your green side:

**January**

Suggestions this month are related to your use of water as well as electricity. Most washing machines and dishwashers have eco-settings which are better for the environment, although they tend to take much longer than the traditional settings. Even if you only use them alternate weeks, that will help.

Most houses will retain their heat for at least 30 minutes or so after the heating goes off, so why not set yours to switch off a bit earlier in the evening. If you have a hot water tank, make sure that it is well-lagged as it will keep the water hot for much longer than you think!

**February**

Empty space in your freezer uses more energy to keep cool, so pack empty spaces with paper or cardboard if necessary.

Make sure that your light bulbs are energy-saving and use lower wattage ones if you don't need a bright light in some areas of the house. Check that your loft insulation complies with the latest recommendation as this will make a big difference to your energy use and also check that your hot water tank and pipes are fully lagged.

Go around the house on a windy day and check the doors, windows and letterbox for draughts. If double glazing is not an option for you, try to use thicker, lined curtains instead.

**March**

Most people in the west eat more meat than they really need, so try to reduce your portion size and fill up with vegetables. The production of red meat is particularly harmful to the environment so cutting it out of your diet is helpful, and substituting oat, soya or almond milk in things like breakfast cereal is an easy way to reduce your dairy intake. Lentils, chickpeas and various beans are full of protein and fibre so they make a good substitute for meat in casseroles and stir-fries while some vegetarian sausages and meatballs can be really tasty. Plan your meals for the week in advance as it will help you to buy just what you need and reduce food waste.

**April**

As many of us venture out into our gardens after the winter, there are a number of things we can do to help the environment. Try growing shrubs and small trees that produce berries for the birds and others that will attract pollinators and butterflies. Even if you only have a small garden you can think about growing a few vegetables through the summer - lettuce, tomatoes, courgettes or even potatoes can easily be grown in pots and a few runner beans look pretty in amongst the flowerbeds! If you can leave a small area of your lawn to grow longer through the summer, then that will help many insects as will a patch of wildflowers in an odd corner. Chemical fertilizers and weedkillers do a lot of harm to wildlife, so clear out your shed or greenhouse and dispose of them safely. Similarly, always check the label on bags of compost to avoid using any that may still contain peat.

**May**

As you look through your summer clothes, try to avoid throwing away anything that is still serviceable. Vinted and sites like that enable you to sell items that have significant value, but charity shops are also a great way to bless other people. While you are dropping off your unwanted things, have a look and see if somebody else has discarded what you need! If you are buying new clothes, check the labels for fair trade and sustainability rather than being produced exceptionally cheaply in some foreign sweatshop. Other items that you may plan to throw away can often be repaired instead - check for local repair cafe's such as the one at the Baptist church.

**June**

We are approaching mid-summers day, with long, light evenings and hopefully some warm sunny days so it is the perfect time to appreciate the wonderful nature and wildlife all around you. Go for walks or picnics with your friends and family or even just take a good book out into the garden or local park and sit quietly reading and enjoying the sounds of the birds and insects. What can you see and recognise, and what can you hear? There are many charities that offer regular email updates about the environment, so perhaps this would be a good time to investigate some of them and sign up. Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and Tewkesbury Nature Reserve are just a couple of the local ones but there are also national organisations like Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace, some of which do not require you to become members.

**July**

Plastics are polluting every area of our world now and so reducing our use of them is really important. The plastic drinks bottles, food packaging and carrier bags can be recycled and then replaced by re-useable ones quite easily. Check through all the plastic spray bottles that tend to clutter up the cupboard under the sink and bathroom cabinet. Do you actually need / use every one of them? Can you buy more environmentally friendly ones instead? There are always things like shampoo and hand soap that everyone uses but perhaps you can think about buying in bulk and refilling your containers?

What about the rubbish that you put in your bins each week? Can you avoid printing out those emails, and have you thought about getting your magazines and bills sent electronically to save paper? What are the items that you are putting in your 'landfill' bin? Could you avoid having to throw them out next week?

**August**

We all have to make journeys sometimes, but it is good to give some thought to how we travel, and the impact it has on our planet. Flying is notoriously bad, so restricting our flights each year (if possible) is a good start. At the start of each week, look at the journeys you must make over the next few days, and decide whether you can combine some of them. Can you do the food shopping after your visit to the dentist rather than making two trips? Can you car-share with somebody for church on Sunday or with a work colleague a couple of days each week? Can you cycle to work or church when the weather is fine, and what about using public transport? When you reach the point of having to change your car, sit down and seriously consider your options rather than simply going for the same again. Have you considered petrol, rather than diesel? Hybrid or electric instead of petrol? A smaller, more economical engine instead of a big one?

**September**

With the summer coming to an end our energy bills will start to climb again. Check up on your energy provider and make sure that they are a renewable source energy supplier. If not, then look to change if possible as it is quite easy these days. Then look at the tariff you are on and see whether a cheaper overnight one would suit your lifestyle bearing in mind that you should be cautious about running certain white goods overnight while you are asleep.

Check your indoor smart meter readout if you have one, so that you become familiar with you daily / weekly energy usage and experiment with ways of reducing it. It can also alert you to a problem with your freezer, or a heater having been left switched on by mistake. If you are a homeowner and anticipate staying in your property for the next few years, then it may be worthwhile for you to consider having solar panels fitted on your roof. Although the initial expense is quite high, the savings and payment from exporting your excess power to the grid means that it can pay for itself in about 7 years. You may also want to consider who you bank with and whether you have invested any savings in ethical companies.

**October**

There are a number of simple ways to save energy when you are cooking, such as putting two different types of vegetable in one saucepan together, and only just covering them with water. If you turn off the ring under the potatoes or rice 10 minutes early, then they will continue to cook in the hot water, although they may take a couple of minutes longer! Use your oven as little as possible and plan your meals so that you cook multiple things in it rather than just one. Try using a slo-cooker for casseroles, soups etc. as it uses a lot less energy.

**November**

Help the wildlife in your garden as the winter approaches by providing bird boxes for them to roost in and bug boxes and log piles for the insects. Log piles do not need to be big, but need a damp, shady spot where they will not be disturbed. Compost bins are a great way to convert your garden waste into compost, but don't put food in them or you will attract rats. A rain butt is a great addition to the garden, reducing the need for using tap-water for your plants in the summer. Make sure it has a lid though, to keep children safe and debris out. A small pond is wonderful for wildlife, but if you can't have one of those, try a birdbath or water feature. You will be surprised by how many birds and insects will appreciate it - especially if you keep it clean and frost free during the winter.

**December**

Christmas is a time that is known for 'over-indulgence' so there are many ways to reduce our carbon footprint this month. Environmentally friendly cards that you recycle after Christmas are good, as is wrapping paper without foil or plastic. Decorations can be made from wood or paper, and some wonderful displays can be made from garden greenery. Food wastage over the Christmas holidays can be particularly high, so plan carefully and check dates on food regularly to avoid this.

One big change that some people are making is to how many presents they buy for other people. Using the 'secret Santa' idea, some families only buy one present for one person, which makes a huge difference in our consumer-driven society.

Finally, as we reach the end of the year, look back at the changes you have made to your lifestyle to help the environment. Give yourself a pat on the back and then make a list of all the new things you will try to do in the year ahead!