

# The 5R's of Green (and Greener) Living

*by Alegre Ramos*



**M**ost people can quote the 3Rs: *reduce, reuse, and recycle*. However, since becoming a mantra of the green movement twenty-plus years ago, their meaning has been diluted. In addition to being updated, the 3R's need to be expanded in order to make them relevant to our modern life. What follows is the Green and Greener 5R's for green living in the modern day. The most important thing to keep in mind is that the R's, both the original version and ours, are hierarchical in their structure, meaning R1, *reduce*, has the most beneficial impact.

## R1: REDUCE

Restrict use of raw materials and energy by reducing consumption. This is the step that has the most opportunity for reducing your footprint on the planet. In some ways, it is the easiest step, since it requires no action; however, it does require a shift in mindset while shopping. A good way to start on your path to reduced consumption is to give yourself a "consumer time-out" when you find something that you like but don't need. Don't buy the item right away. Instead, go home and give yourself 24 hours to see if you really will use the item. If you go home and forget about the item, you probably didn't really want it. If you can't stop thinking about it, go ahead and give yourself permission to get it. If you find that too difficult, then buy the item, but don't use it right away and keep the receipt. If after a week you still haven't used it, consider returning it. Reducing doesn't just mean not buying things, it also means using your current resources more efficiently. For instance, reduce your printer margins to use less paper, drive 55 miles per hour and get 20%+ more miles per gallon, use drip irrigation instead of sprinklers or buy used. Getting into the *reduce* mindset will really get you thinking differently about the way you live and use things and soon you'll be finding ways to reduce that are easy but have a big impact.

## R2: RESEARCH

Once you've decided you really need to buy something, do the research to find the "greenest" option out there. Questions you should ask include: is the product made with recycling in mind? Did the company who made it pay a fair wage for its

manufacturing? Is the product non-toxic? Where was it made and can I get it more locally? Do your homework. This step will also help with step R1: reducing consumption because sometimes you might find that there is no green option out there, and maybe that means you shouldn't buy the product at all.

## R3: REUSE/REPURPOSE/REPAIR/RETURN

Traditionally, the second R was *reuse*, however, this is a little narrow. For instance, you are *reusing* a plastic water bottle by refilling it with water a second time. However, you could also *repurpose* it by using it as a bird feeder. Also, once something has broken you can make it useful again by *repairing* it. The fourth option is to *return* the product to where it came so it may be reused. The benefit of

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*returning over recycling* is that the product doesn't need to undergo an energy intensive remanufacturing (aka: recycling) process to be useful again. *Repurposing* can also be fun in that it encourages you to look creatively at the resources you have. For instance, when we remodeled Green and Greener, we took the old vinyl blinds from the previous tenants and applied them to the walls as a decorative finish and we turned old wine crates into speakers.

## R4: RECYCLE

Once you have exhausted the options above, move on to *recycling*, which has gotten a disproportional amount of the 3R attention considering it is the lowest ranked of the three. Recycling means to take an object and use energy and resources in order to turn it back into raw materials for further manufacturing. While it's better than throwing an item away, it still requires a lot of transportation

and energy, so it's not the cure-all many believe. Almost anything can be recycled, but the real question is, is it valuable enough that someone is actually doing it? Use the web to find the what/where/how of recycling. Two good resources are the National Recycling Coalition's site: <http://www.nrc-recycle.org/localresources.aspx> and LIME's guide to "How to Recycle Everything:" [http://www.lime.com/features/limes\\_guide\\_to\\_recycling](http://www.lime.com/features/limes_guide_to_recycling).

## R5: RESPONSIBLE DISPOSAL

You might still have some items to dispose of and the key is to do this responsibly. Remember that fruit, vegetable and yard waste doesn't have to be thrown away; it can be composted (which is step R3.) Most metal, paper, plastic and glass can be easily recycled locally (step R4.) Other traditional "trash" items have green alternatives, such as biodegradable cellulose sponges substituted for the synthetic variety and rechargeable batteries instead of single use. Items such as compact fluorescent light bulbs, single use batteries, prescription drugs, electronics and paint thinner are just some of the "household hazardous waste" (HHW) that needs to be disposed of properly in order to not contaminate the land and water in your area. It only takes a little mercury or lead to do real harm to ground water and you'd be surprised at how often these two metals show up in products! Check with your city's waste pick-up for HHW drop-off locations in your area. Often, living a greener life means you will have fewer HHW items because you will have reduced your consumption of these items to begin with.

With a little practice the 5R's will become second nature to you and will keep you and the planet healthier and wealthier. Don't feel overwhelmed by the information, true change comes with time. The key is to do a little bit now and to grow from there. Remember, that big change comes from lots of people making little changes. So make your little change today!

**Alegre Ramos** is a LEED AP interior designer and green living expert based in the San Fernando Valley. Her store, Green and Greener, is located in Valley Village and online at <http://green-and-greener.com>. Stay up to date on important green info by signing-up for her Twitter feed: <http://twitter.com/greenandgreener>.