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A light shone on CFL superiority

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Energy savings are for real, and they're better bulbs now

Last month's energy audit left me with lots of challenges about getting "the building envelope" of my little house up to a higher standard.

I'm still mulling over exactly what I will do, but I'm not being too hard on myself for not taking instant action. That's just the way I make decisions: slowly and, I like to think, carefully. I'll get to it, really I will.

The experience left me thinking about other ways to save energy and create fewer greenhouse gases at home — some of which I started doing in past years as I began to think about my personal responsibility to reduce my carbon footprint. So, a few pats on the back for the following: I've turned my thermostats down a notch from what was my norm. And I'm way stricter with myself about leaving the baseboard heaters off or almost off until I really need them. I've also unplugged my electronics from the wall sockets and replugged them into power bars with switches, so I can eliminate "phantom power" use. (It's an amazing waster of energy. Check it out on the internet.) I've changed some of my food buying habits too, and started a vegetable garden a few years ago, cooperatively with a neighbour — my first veggie garden ever. (Yum!)

On the down side, though, there was the light bulb experiment. I tried, I really tried to adopt compact fluorescent lights (CFLs). But when I tried them some years back I hated them. They flickered, they buzzed, I found out they had mercury in them, and on top of all that, they cast a dim, unfriendly bluish light. For the light-sensitive, like me, that's a recipe for depression.

Since then, climate gurus have been pushing CFLs. Friends and neighbours have said as a point of pride, "We've changed our light bulbs." And countries like England and Australia have set up national programs to phase out incandescents. Rebelliously, I vowed to stockpile these bad bulbs in my basement lest they disappear altogether.

Sounds like something an oil company might do with its outdated products eh? So this month I decided my challenge would be to look at CFLs again.

First question, do they matter? The very idea sounds like a joke: change the world by changing light bulbs. Really? My research made the answer pretty clear: yes, CFLs can make a surprisingly big difference.

Project Porchlight, an Ottawa-based group that is promoting CFLs with the support of several provincial power agencies, claims that if every household in Canada replaced just one incandescent bulb with a compact fluorescent, the reduction in greenhouse gases would be the equivalent of taking 66,000 cars off the road. Now count the number of light bulbs in your house and do the math. If that's even approximately true, it would be huge.

But is it true? Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. and one of the big thinkers in the field of environmental sustainability, says it is. In fact, he claims that the single quickest, most effective and least expensive way to reduce electricity use worldwide is to change all the lighting, at home and everywhere else.

How could that be? Well, according to my research, what we call “light bulbs” should really be called “heat bulbs.” Yup, they are in fact tiny furnaces. Just five to 10 per cent of the energy they use produces light. The rest of it, 90-95 per cent, generates heat. The metal filament in a regular bulb can reach a temperature of, wait for it, 2,300 degrees Celsius. Pretty crazy, eh?

CFLs get it right: they make mostly light, not heat. On average, a fluorescent bulb uses about 75 per cent less energy to produce the same amount of light as an equivalent incandescent, plus a little bit of heat. Oh yes, and they last 10 times as long too. That makes for some pretty attractive cost savings as well as big energy use reductions.

But what about the other issues: the flickering and the mercury and the depressing light?

The mercury is still a definite problem. It’s bad stuff. There’s about 5 mg of it in every CFL and it can cause serious health problems if inhaled or ingested, no doubt about it. CFLs must absolutely never be tossed into a landfill to contaminate the air and the soil. They have to be treated as hazardous waste, which we haven’t been able to do on Salt Spring — until now.

Starting on July 2, our recycling centre accepts CFLs for special handling. Thanks, guys, and be careful with those things!

To test out the other quality issues, I went shopping locally for fluorescent pot lights in particular, since they are the main light source in my house. There was just one choice at Mouat’s and I’ve got a sample bulb shining over my shoulder as I write.

It’s a dramatic improvement over the 10-year-old version that still flickers on my porch, for sure. The light is strong and steady and warm. Is it the perfect tone to fend off the sad light of winter? I’m not sure it is, and I’m going to look at other products. But when I think of all the energy these things can save, it seems like a no brainer. I’m going to change over completely. Only when the old ones burn out, of course.

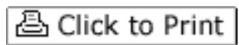
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