11 Low-tech Methods for Eco-Friendly Laundry

(NaturalPapa – Derek Markham) Dirty laundry happens. And then washing clothes happens, usually quite wastefully, without a thought for the overall impact of this common chore. Whether you're trying to transition to having a lower environmental footprint, attempting to rely less on the grid, or just want to go greener in the laundry room, there are a variety of simple and low-tech methods for washing clothes in a more sustainable manner.

When my family and I were experimenting with living in a tiny house, we spent six years learning how to do things in a simpler and more sustainable manner, sometimes out of choice, and sometimes out of necessity. And like most families, especially those that use cloth diapers for their baby, washing clothes seemed like a never-ending chore. Going to the laundromat every couple of days wasn't really optimal for us, except in the middle of winter when it was too cold to wash clothes outside, so without our own washing machine, we had to get a little creative. Some of the ways we dealt with laundry weren't so much about washing clothes, but about needing to wash clothes less often, and to use less energy and water to do so.

We've since moved on into a house with our own washing machine, but many of these eco-friendly laundry tactics have stuck with us over the years.

1. Wear clothes longer between washing: This is kind of a no-brainer, and probably doesn't apply to socks and underwear (but your mileage may vary), but only washing the clothes that are noticeably dirty or smelly is a great way to cut down on the amount and frequency of laundry that needs to get done. Unless your job leaves your clothes dirty at the end of the

day, chances are you can wear pants, shirts, sweaters, skirts, etc., at least twice (if not more) before washing them. Personally, I also try to buy pants in colors that don't easily show dirt or wear, and I choose to purchase longer-wearing items instead of always going for the bargain clothes. For me, that means that I tend to go for the heavier weight pants, such as those made by Carhartt or another workwear brand, and to buy them in dark colors. Obviously this isn't optimal if your job has a strict dress code or requires wearing white pants…

2. Wash by hand: We began washing clothes by hand out of necessity, as we didn't have a washing machine, and while it takes more time and physical energy to get it done, it also had the benefit of making us very aware of how much laundry we were generating each week. There a number of low-tech tools for washing clothes by hand, but we found that a laundry plunger, such as this one from Lehman's, was effective, affordable, and long-lasting. We used five-gallon plastic buckets (which I was able to get for free from the local college's dining services) to wash and rinse in, and we were learned that if we started washing the least-dirty clothes first, we were able to wash multiple loads in the same water, and then do the same with the rinse water. After we were finished with one bucket of dirty water, we used it to water trees and to keep our compost sufficiently moist. If you're looking for another human-powered laundry solution, this pedal-powered version looks intriguing.

3. Use a clothes line: The sun and wind are very effective at drying clothes throughout the year (it even works in the winter, unless we hit long periods of below-freezing temperatures or snow and rain), and when drying clothes outside wasn't an option, we used clothes racks to dry them inside. We didn't ever buy or build a clothes wringer, as we lived in a dry sunny region, but that could be an effective method of speeding up the drying process, especially in more

humid locations. Depending on the climate where you live, using an outside clothes line may not always be the best choice, but either a homemade or a purpose-built clothes rack can do the trick.

4. Wash clothes while showering: This is an old backpacking and traveling trick which can enable you to get clean clothes while you clean your body. Either step into the shower fully clothed and get them wet under the showerhead, or remove them first and put them in the bottom of the shower with you. If you use a gentle all-purpose soap such as Dr. Bronner's, there's no need for a separate laundry soap, and the soap from your body, in combination with the scrubbing action of your feet on your clothes, can effectively wash your clothes in almost the same amount of water that a shower alone uses.

5. Use concentrated and biodegradable laundry soap: When we were washing clothes by hand and using the resulting greywater for plants, we chose to use a brand that was specifically designed for greywater systems (Oasis), but there are certainly other greywater-friendly options on the market. We still always buy a concentrated and eco-friendly laundry soap, even after getting a washing machine. And for those that want to get started with using greywater for the landscape, re-routing your washing machine discharge to a mulched greywater basin can be an appropriate project (check your local regulations, or proceed at your own risk, as many municipalities are very strict about greywater projects).

6. Avoid using chlorine bleach: We've managed to do without chlorine bleach for washing clothes for many years, and I believe there isn't a strong case for using it (again, unless you are required to wear bright white clothes). There are options for avoiding the use of bleach in the laundry, including using non-chlorine laundry whiteners, but we've found that the sun is the most effective and eco-friendly bleaching method, and that drying clothes on the line was sufficient for our purposes (although we do live in a very

sunny region of the southwest, and your location may not be optimal for that).

7. Only wash full loads: This is another simple tactic that should be second nature to use these days, but isn't as common as it ought to be. Doing small loads of laundry on the same settings as a full load is just wasteful, and by waiting for a full load to accumulate before washing it, we can optimize our laundry habits. If we've only got one item to wash, then washing by hand may be a better choice.

8. Only use cold water: Even after getting a washing machine, I left the hot water supply unhooked, and we've only used cold water to wash our clothes for many years now. They get just as clean, and by not having to heat the wash water, our energy consumption (and energy costs) are much lower. In the event that we do use a laundromat (when traveling, for example), we still choose the cold water wash.

9. Use a laundromat's commercial-sized washing machine: Using a laundromat's large commercial washing machine may be more efficient in terms of water use, and can let you get away with one big load instead of multiple smaller loads of laundry. Obviously this depends on the age and efficiency of the washing machines at the laundromat, but many times the front-loading washers use a lot less water to get the same job done as the standard top-loaders in many homes.

10. Skip the dryer sheets: Dryer sheets are kind of a mystery to me, as I'm not sure why people still choose to buy and use them. Perhaps it's a matter of marketing, or perhaps we may believe that unless something comes out of the laundry with a scent on it, it isn't truly clean, but I feel fortunate to have not bought into that. Not only are dryer sheets an additional item that must be manufactured (and then disposed of), they may actually leave undesirable residues on our clothes, which are then in direct contact with our skin.

11. Purchase a more efficient front-loading washing machine: This item is on my list of essential home upgrades to save up for, and is a relatively simple method for more washing clothes more sustainably. Front-loading washers can get clothes just as clean, but use much less water to do so. And if we choose a model that is also rated higher in energy-efficiency, we can also reduce the amount of electricity we use for laundry.

The weekly chore of washing clothes can be done with a lower environmental impact, whether you own a washing machine or not, and greening our laundry process can be an effective piece of an overall personal sustainability initiative.