

Ms. Harris's Book of Green Household Management

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Extract

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The idea for this book began to form while I was staying in a Cornish cottage with my family a couple of years ago. It was a lovely place. Slate floors in the kitchen and cosily battered antique furniture.

A leafy garden with a sand pit, and a little cove of beach two minutes down the hill. But under the sink, in place of my familiar battalion of eco-friendly bottles, I was confronted with a gaggle of big-manufacturer brands, all bright greens and yellows and blues, with their hypochlorite bleaching agents, antibacterials and synthetic perfumes, and a host of other chemicals whose effects on our health have yet to be gauged.

I ended up using the more benign-looking ones (there wasn't a health-food shop or supermarket nearby), but it made me realize a couple of things. First, that I'd already changed my ideas considerably from a few years before, when buying anything environmentally friendly seemed like a luxury. And second, that if only I knew how, I could have cleaned the cottage with just a few household basics such as vinegar and baking soda.

What I needed, I decided, was a green household compendium. It should inform me about all the eco-friendly options – from saving water and energy to ethical clothing, growing your own veg and cutting down on waste – but not in an overwhelming way. It should bring together hints and tips based on traditional

housekeeping methods, from a time before we got used to so many synthetic chemical cocktails, but also take into account our modern lifestyles with their slimline laptops and dry-clean-only fabrics. It should be presented in a way that made for sensible, useful reading – something you could turn to for helpful reference – but be entertaining and not preachy.

It should be, if you like, a kind of Mrs Beeton for the climate-changing twenty-first century, but more fun to dip into over a cup of (fairtrade) coffee. The name – *Ms Harris's Book of Green Household Management* – started out as a pastiche, but it seemed fitting and so the title has stuck.

In writing it I've consulted many different sources, from centuries-old publications in the British Library to the wealth of diverse information on the web, and from parents and friends to experts at eco-related organizations. Our home has become, at times, something of a laboratory as I've experimented with laundry alternatives and ways of using greywater, and installed our Electrisave energy consumption meter. There have been great successes – our vegetable plot is perhaps our happiest achievement – and also failures, including the marmalade pan that boiled over and taught me how *not* to clean sugar off a ceramic hob.

My knowledge has increased enormously, and as a result I'm much more confident about the steps I'm taking in a greener direction – my hope is you'll feel the same after reading this book and having it there to consult on your kitchen shelf. Through trial and error I've fathomed out a lot of what works and what doesn't. It's one thing to be told, 'Try baking soda for cleaning,' but quite

another to understand its various properties and the easiest ways to use it. That's the kind of information I've attempted to put in this book – the practical steps of how to do things.

Like me, most people would like to be at least a bit greener in their homes and lifestyles, but often don't have the necessary knowledge or skills. After decades of being sold supermarket aisles-full of chemical products that promise instant, no-effort results, we've forgotten the crafts of household management. There are so many things I had no idea about before I began working on this book. Do you know how to make a furniture cleaner from kitchen ingredients? I couldn't have told you at the start of my researches but now I wouldn't think of using anything except an olive oil and vinegar mix on our stripped-wood banisters.



Of course, you don't have to prepare all your own cleaning mixtures or laundry powders. Eco brands are now making their presence felt and a very useful range of products is readily available. Even the multinationals are bringing out greener options. However, simpler, cheaper alternatives are usually just as good, and many of the ingredients, such as vinegar and salt, have been used in food for centuries and more – making them the safest kind of chemicals with which to shine your home.

Saving energy and water can seem even more daunting than swapping to eco-friendly cleaners. Partly, this is to do with the size of the problem, especially when it comes to climate change. Can switching the TV off standby really prevent catastrophic floods and droughts? Well, no, and certainly not if just a few people are acting on their own. But as the cleaning up of our rivers in the UK shows, concerted efforts can and do bring results. If more of us make changes in our own lives, and show that we want a different attitude to inform government, business and world political decisions on the environment, then, with luck, something of value will be achieved. And even if we don't manage to persuade anyone else, we will have made the choice of changing our own behaviour and ecological footprint.

Perhaps, after that high-mindedness, this is the right point for a confession – I love to spend longer than I strictly should in our power shower, with energy-wasting hot water cascading down (five minutes uses about the same amount of water as a bath). I know it's wrong (and in my defence I'd like to point out that the power shower was here when we moved in) but I can't help it. Still, it's not as though I use it anything like every day, so maybe it counts as only a partial green sin (→ page 231 for more about bathing and showering less frequently).

There are plenty of occasions when I forget the green rules – when I'm tired, for example, I have a tendency to wander up to bed leaving the broadband router on all night – and I don't follow all of the tips in this book all of the time. You don't have to be perfect (or an austerity fiend) to be a green householder, but simply try to do what you can.



If you have green leanings it's all too easy to get tangled up in guilt and dilemmas about whether you're a terrible person for having a dishwasher (that's another confession – we have a dishwasher) or

whether it's OK really because, if you scrape the plates rather than rinsing, dishwashers can actually use less water than doing it by hand.

Too much guilt can lead to an unhelpful state of paralysis. One thing I'd like this book to do is to relieve some of the panic and palpitations (or total denial) that can accompany reading or hearing about the dire consequences of not recycling our tins or insisting on flying to our holiday destinations. The advice here is practical and do-able, and you don't have to do it all at once. Developing a greener lifestyle is an ongoing process – there are layers of greenness, and many different areas in which to apply its principles creatively, once you start to look into it all.

Before I took my own first steps I'd had a vaguely growing awareness of eco issues for some years, but while working hard and late and living the singleton (and then couple) lifestyle, I hadn't actually put a great deal into practice apart from recycling the newspapers and wine bottles. What changed everything was having a baby.

New parents are bombarded with advice about making sure everything is sterilized and clinically clean, but at the same time frightening evidence is emerging about the build-up of toxic

chemicals in young children. So I was torn between a desire to protect my baby from the onslaught of germs and fear of making him into a chemistry lab. My solution was to look for alternatives to bleach, lysol and triclosan – and worry less about bacteria.

For my next step, I thought I'd do the right thing and opt for re-usable nappies – an altogether tougher assignment, I found. Here's another confession – we lasted nine months, then somehow slipped into disposables.

Our mistake was possibly to be too keen too early. Clive (who refuses to be called my partner so I suppose I have to call him my boyfriend) and I put in our order with a promising local nappy laundry before our son, Ethan, was born. But when he came along, all tiny and milk-fed, the folded cloth nappies and huge-looking waterproof wraps didn't quite seal things in as you might want. We used shaped nappies for a while, then went for one of the new biodegradable disposables. (To learn more about the nappy conundrum, → Chapter 14.)

And that's about the point I'd reached when we went on our Cornish holiday. Since then we've made some big changes, including moving from London to Bath. But we don't have a cutting-edge eco home here. It's a Victorian mid-terrace house in need of more insulation. We don't generate our own electricity; we don't have a reedbed greywater filter. What we have done is tried to live in the kind of greener way that most people could do in most homes, without having to totally transform them.

We've saved some money (on energy, for example, and by growing our own salads and vegetables) and spent some money (mainly on redesigning the garden, and buying organic products).



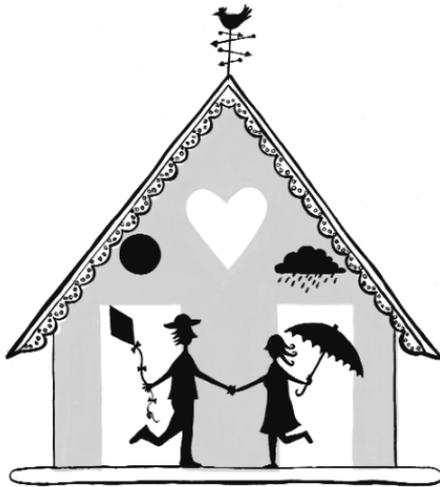
We've developed new habits, such as always looking to see if we can re-use something before putting it out for recycling or in the bin, and we've rediscovered creative skills, including making our own Christmas cards.

Green household management might seem like a challenge but it's not too great a one. A bit of enthusiasm, a few ideas, adapting to different ways of doing and thinking about things are really all that's needed. Being greener doesn't have to be all hair shirts on the one hand, or simply switching to eco-consumer brands on the other. There is another way, and you might even have some fun if you venture along it.

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WHAT IS GREEN HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT?



Green household management is smart household management. It's about making your home welcoming, people-friendly and environmentally friendly. It's about running your house (or flat, or house-share) in a way that reduces your waste and carbon footprints, cuts your utility bills and unnecessary household spending, and shuts the door on many potentially harmful chemicals. It's about being creative, challenging old habits and enjoying trying to do things in a different way.

Making your home greener doesn't need to involve spending loads of extra time on chores, or loads of extra money on so-called green products (although some choices, such as organic food, do tend to be more expensive). It doesn't mean throwing out everything in your house and starting again from scratch, and it doesn't mean signing up to the belief that everything natural is good and anything invented after the Victorian era is automatically to be distrusted.

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK

The main focus of what you'll read here is the practical day-to-day running of your home. Things like food, clothing care and laundry, cleaning, waste management, energy and water use,

and planning celebrations – the stuff you do in the regular household round. The aim of this book is to be a source of useful advice and skills. It includes the most effective methods and products that I and others have discovered, where to find them, and websites to browse if you want to investigate any subject further.

There are tips on buying appliances and removing fruit juice stains; on making your own marmalade and cleaning your computer; on choosing greener nursery furnishings and making a DIY wedding bouquet.

The advice combines traditional techniques and twenty-first-century innovations, and applies them to our modern homes, with their iPods and stainless steel fridges. Whether you have a tiny urban flat or a house with a large garden, and whether you're a student, parent or full-time career-person, the information in these pages will help you to negotiate a route to greener living.

THE LOST ARTS OF THE HOUSEHOLD MANAGER

Most of us are now painfully aware of the need to care for the environment and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We do think about the environmental impact of the choices we make for our homes. A growing number of resources and initiatives are available to help us, but the prospect of transforming the way we keep house can still be daunting.

It doesn't help that we've become deskilled, and lost touch with many traditional household arts. Just as ready meals mean we have

The basics of green household management

Less is more – use less, live more is a key concept of much green and conservation thinking.

Cut carbon emissions – by reducing energy use, consumption and waste, and choosing energy-efficient appliances.

Detox your home – by using simpler cleaning formulas and, where possible, furnishings and finishes with fewer treatments that could contain potentially harmful chemicals.

Reduce water use – cut the strain on water resources and save carbon emissions at the same time.

Choose organic, local and sustainably produced foods – and learn the delights of cooking from raw ingredients.

Reduce, re-use, repair, recycle – cut back on the waste that comes into and goes out of your home.

Choose fairtrade – look at where the goods you buy come from, and whether they've been produced ethically.

Be creative – find your own green solutions as you go along, and enjoy doing it.

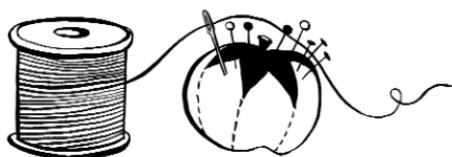
less need to cook, quick-fix household cleaners and cheap clothing mean we don't need to know how to use simple mineral or plant-based cleaning methods, or even sew up a hem.

Moving to a more sustainable, less oil-dependent and chemical-filled household often (but not always) means turning to older,

simpler, more home-made ways of doing things. This doesn't mean harking back to the days before washing machines or vacuum cleaners (although carpet sweepers have their place, → page 25), but if we want to be greener in our modern houses, it's useful to get to grips with some of these basic skills – cooking with raw ingredients, sewing, composting, growing at least some of our own food – and see how to adapt them to our own needs.

Thrift and craft

Green thinking has brought some old-fashioned ideas out of the closet – 'living within our means', for instance, which could be translated today as 'sustainable development', and 'make do and mend' and the 'cottage industries' of home-based crafts that are finding new devotees.



In researching this book I encountered blogging communities of craftspeople who are experimenting with natural dyes and spinning, while not long back knitting was suddenly *the* thing to be seen doing. Household management doesn't need to be limited to cleaning and meal provision; there are huge possibilities for being creative, from making preserves, to growing flowers for cutting, to designing your own gift cards, wrapping paper and home furnishings.

In the green household, everything can become a resource. 'Old stuff' is no longer just something to be chucked away, but something to be thought about, re-used, swapped or made over. All of which means that thrifty living doesn't have to be austere or dull – far from it.

CHANGING THE HABITS OF A LIFETIME

Don't try to do it all at once. That's the first thing I'd say. Choose a bit of 'greenery' that you feel most drawn to, or that you figure will make most difference to your home comfort/your bank balance/the environment and go for that first. I started off with cleaning products and organic fruit, vegetables and baby clothes, and moved on from there. I made changes in some areas only once I had begun to research this book – and there are others where our household is still a work in progress.

Changing habits means making informed decisions. When we're running on automatic, it's easy to fall into bad old ways. Some of the changes will probably seem like a lot of effort to begin with – but look back after a few months and you'll see that many green household strategies have become your normal way of doing things. (Give it a while and you'll remember that re-usable shopping bag pretty much all the time . . .)

❖ **Green householder's tip:**

❖ *For local support, see if your area is part of the Transition Towns movement (www.transitiontowns.org). Transition communities are growing up around the UK and worldwide, with local people coming together to address the issues of Peak Oil and climate change practically, from growing their own food to sharing skills and lobbying for improved public transport.*

The time problem

You might feel there aren't enough hours in the day to be the complete green household manager – and you'd be right. I'd rather be out in the garden than cleaning the house, and mending gets done only when there's a heap of it and I've enough energy to tackle it rather than curl up on the sofa.

Some strategies – including energy-saving fixes such as installing insulation or draft-proofing (→ Chapter 3) – are one-offs. Others, such as always seeing what you can re-use, are more of an ongoing enterprise, but take just a few minutes.

It's really up to you what kind of green householder you choose to be – energy-efficient aficionado, baking-and-sewing supremo, or grow-your-own guru. If your entire household decides to take up the challenge, you can play to each one's strengths.

If your partner (or housemate) isn't interested . . .

Moving to greener ways of doing things is a change and so likely to be resisted unless your family or housemates can see the benefits. It may be that not everyone in your household is as convinced of the need to be green as you are, although the arguments in favour are impressive.

- ♥ Saving money can be a great incentive for the environmentally sceptical. In advance of making changes, explain how much they are likely to save you, and plan together what to do with those savings. Check energy bills and weekly shopping receipts to see how it's going, but bear in mind that price increases may

make the savings look less than they are. For energy, for example, check the number of kilowatt hours used, which should be listed on your bill.

- ♥ Make sure you explain why you're calling on members of the household to make changes, and that they know how to do what you're asking them to do. It's no good banning certain products unilaterally if you haven't explained exactly why, and discussed replacements.
- ♥ Use the competitive instinct to your advantage – if internal competition works in your household, green challenges, such as who can save the most greywater, or come up with the most creative use for a cereal packet liner, might be a way forward.
- ♥ If your wife, husband, boyfriend, girlfriend or housemate is stressed and always busy, limit what you're asking for. Maybe he or she could help with one weekly task to start with, such as putting out the recycling (nearly the same as putting out the rubbish), or something relaxing and satisfying, such as picking strawberries.
- ♥ Give lots of praise and positive feedback – and, tempting as it may be, try to avoid anything approaching nagging. (For tips on encouraging children, → page 382.)

BALANCING GREEN IMPERATIVES

When I started writing this book, some friends of friends made the very valid point that since climate change is now recognized as the greatest threat facing our planet, shouldn't we focus all our efforts on reducing fossil fuel consumption and cutting greenhouse gas

omissions? Isn't a broader greenness in danger of diverting crucial attention and resources from the real big issue?

Some of you reading this book may well agree and want to concentrate on energy above all else – although it's worth remembering that other green principles, such as reducing waste and cutting water consumption, can also lower carbon emissions. But for those of us who feel it's important to adopt a balanced approach that takes in all of the environmental, health and ethical impacts, trying to be green can be something of a juggling act.

For example, you may feel instinctively that re-usable nappies are naturally better than disposables, but if you buy a lot of them, wash at high temperatures and use a tumble dryer, they could be worse in terms of energy use. Then there's the organic food miles dilemma – do you buy organic beans that have come from Africa and are supporting farmers there, or pesticide-sprayed ones from a local farm?

It's impossible to satisfy every single green diktat in all your choices. None of us is perfect, so I reckon the thing to do to stay sane – and not fall into a fit of green paralysis – is to make the best possible choice you can at the time, given the information available and what is most important to you.

IS IT REALLY GREEN?

Some of the attractive-sounding green claims on product labels are informative, but others are more for marketing hype than helping you find what has truly green credentials. I've included some of the main marques to look out for, but new products and sites are

always springing up, and information becoming available. I'll try to post updates on the Ms Harris website, www.ms-harris.com, and do leave your own findings and comments to inform others.

The best measure of the greenness of any product or process is life-cycle assessment (LCA) – environmental analysts actually add up all the product's impacts through its entire life, from raw materials, production and use to disposal or recycling. This method is being strongly encouraged by the European Commission and is already used as the basis for some eco-labels. As it becomes more widely used, the information generated should begin to show what really are the greenest options (there may, of course, be surprises).



How to look after this book

This book is intended to be kept in your kitchen – or somewhere else where it comes easily to hand in a domestic eco-crisis or for everyday reference. Its pages may, through regular use or occasional mishap, become stained or creased. Don't worry if this happens: it means that the volume has been put to good use. In a similar spirit, feel free to write your own notes, or adaptations to recipes and instructions, in the margins.

When pages become stuck together, hold them briefly in the steam of a boiling kettle and ease apart. Running the handle of a spoon in between the stuck pages may also help. You might like to make your own cover from wallpaper scraps or decorated brown paper.

If, for whatever reason, you no longer find this book useful, please try to re-home it sensitively. Pass it on to a friend or relative, swap it through a site such as www.readitswapit.co.uk or www.bookmooch.com, or release it into a suitable wild habitat with a Bookcrossing ID number (www.bookcrossing.com).

