

Green Scene: Every Day is Earth Day

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[photograph]

[caption: The large Caligo butterfly, found throughout lowland Central America, has a wing spread of up to 18 cm and a large eyespot to deter predators. Its larvae feed on bananas, in addition to native plants which has led it being considered an agricultural pest by banana growers.

Bruce Brandhorst photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: You can shop like every day is Earth Day]

On March 29, we celebrated Earth Hour when everyone was encouraged to turn off lights to conserve electricity and “fight global warming”. Almost half of the adult population in Canada is thought to have participated – it probably helped that Earth Hour coincided with a period of the evening suitable for candle-lit dining. Earlier this week, we celebrated Earth Day on April 22. In the lower mainland, this event appears to have morphed into a 30-day period (see www.30days.ca) during which people are asked to integrate sustainability into their lives. While this sounds good, what about the other eleven months of the year?

A recent survey indicated many people planned to be more socially responsible and make more sustainable choices for financial investments, vacations, car purchases, home decorating and new shoes. Perhaps, that last item reflects the influence of our provincial Minister of Finance. However laudable these intentions, the articles under consideration appear to be those purchased with the optional portion of the household budget. Why not apply such high-minded principles to everyday necessities? An Earth Day poll revealed only 19% of BC residents consider the environment when shopping for food. Yet, grocery shopping typically consumes a relatively large and regular portion of most household budgets. Why not incorporate sustainable purchasing practices into what goes into your grocery cart?

While some people purchase organically-grown products simply out of concern for their personal health, such decisions also help the planet. Growing crops under pesticide-free conditions avoids harm to the wildlife that live in the fields and the farmers who work there. Organic farming practices produce a healthier soil with an enriched composition of micronutrients and enhanced carbon-storing capacities. In contrast, pesticides are mainly derived from fossil fuels and require more fossil fuel for delivery to farmers.

For several years, I have purchased organically-grown bananas. This started when I discovered a beautiful butterfly in Central America was threatened by pesticides applied to banana plantations. Subsequently, I learned farm workers were also being harmed, some suffering from kidney or lung damage, others from infertility after exposure to pesticides that are no longer allowed to be used in North America. Thus, buying organic bananas brings substantial benefits for farm workers, birds, butterflies and the soil – this sounds like a bargain even if I pay a few cents more. When I learned that, in the USA, farmers who produce conventionally-grown tomatoes and strawberries are still allowed to use a soil fumigant that destroys the ozone layer, I switched to organic or Canadian-grown products.

When grocery shopping, I look for items that are organically-grown and, ideally, carry a fair trade logo to indicate farm workers have received a fair wage for their efforts. While some local grocery stores do a better job than others at carrying such products, including fair trade organic tea and coffee, most stores now have a

few organic products. Studies have shown these products have a higher content of essential micronutrients than do conventionally-grown crops and, of course, they will contain no harmful pesticide residues. If you need to be convinced that organic products taste better, do a taste test on some carrots. Purchasing locally-grown food when it is available will help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation.

Another way to be more sustainable with your grocery shopping is to purchase less meat. While you may not want to eliminate meat entirely from your diet, try to reduce portion size or serve one vegetarian meal a week. It has been estimated that farm animals now utilize 70% of all agricultural land and consume one third of the world's supply of grain. With an ever-increasing population of over six billion people and a looming threat of food shortages in some parts of the world, perhaps, it's time get cattle back to grazing naturally on grass.

So, next time you shop for groceries, consider your impact on the planet as you fill your basket. And don't forget to take your own bags to carry your purchases home.