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[10 on Tuesday] 10 Ways to Green Your Historic Home

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Job Corps students help restore Grey Towers National Historic Site to make it a more sustainable facility.

We walked you through [10 easy ways to weatherize your historic home](#) a couple weeks ago. Now we want to help you take it a step further with these simple approaches to making your home more sustainable.

But what exactly do we mean when we say “sustainable,” at least in the context of historic preservation? Well, **we’re talking about using what we already have -- in this case, buildings, and the features and materials that make them unique and historic.** Many older homes were constructed with energy efficiency in mind (when home owners once had no choice, because things like central AC weren’t an option), so their “environmental friendliness quotient” is already high.

Today it's up to us, the current caretakers, to continue retrofitting and reusing these places in ways that both honor their original construction and also reduce their environmental footprint in a modern world.

So let's not waste any more energy -- here are 10 tips for greening your historic home.

1. Keep original windows intact. Studies show that older windows can perform as well as vinyl replacements. Weatherstrip them so that they seal tightly, caulk the exterior trim, and repair cracked glazing or putty around glass panels. You'll reduce landfill waste and the demand for vinyl, a non-biodegradable material that gives off toxic byproducts when it's made.

2. Use light paint colors for your house's exterior. Lighter colors reflect heat better than darker ones. Many older homes were typically painted with light-reflecting finishes, so you can be sustainable and accurate in one fell swoop.

3. Insulate the attic, basement, and crawl space. About 20 percent of energy costs come from heat loss in those areas. Just take care to avoid materials that can damage historic fabric.

4. Reuse old materials such as brick, stone, glass, and slate when making home improvements. You can also scour local salvage shops to find contemporaneous materials (and save it from going to a landfill).

5. Plant trees. Evergreen trees on the north and west sides of your house can block winter winds, and leafy trees on the east, west, and northwest provide shade from the summer sun. Use old photos of your house to try to match the historic landscaping. (Don't have photos? [See our tips on researching your home's history!](#))



Example of a well-shaded wraparound porch on a historic home in Oxford, North Carolina.

6. When appropriate, open the windows and use fans and dehumidifiers, which consume less energy than air-conditioning. Many old houses were designed with good cross-ventilation; take advantage of your home's layout. Ceiling fans lower the perceived temperature in summer, lessening reliance on air conditioning and saving energy. And in the winter, they draw warm air down from the ceiling, saving on heating costs. So again, double benefit for one change.

7. Keep doors airtight by weatherstripping, caulking, and painting them regularly. Recent studies suggest that installing a storm door is not necessarily cost-effective. Better to keep your doors in fighting shape -- and ideally in keeping with the character of the house.

8. Install fireplace draft stoppers, attic door covers, and dryer vent seals that open only when your dryer is in use. An open dampener in a fireplace can increase energy costs by 30 percent, and attic doors and dryer vent ducts are notorious energy sieves.

9. Restore porches and awnings. Porches, awnings, and shutters were intended for shade and insulation, plus they add a lot of personality to your home. To further save energy, draw shades on winter nights and summer days.

10. Inspecting, maintaining, and repairing your existing roof is the best way to "go green" by using what you already have. Depending on the materials, installation, and ongoing maintenance, some roofs will last longer than others. We hope to present more info on solar-powered roof systems in future 10 on Tuesday posts -- stay tuned!

And as we mentioned in our weatherizing post, an energy audit is the best place to start. It will help you determine what you need to do now and exactly how much you're likely to save.

Happy greening!

Want a ballpark estimate on the cost of going green? [Check out our Green Guide](#) to get a sense of how long it might take to recover the dollars you invest.



Julia Rocchi is the managing editor for the National Trust. By day she wrangles content; by night (and weekends), she shops local, travels to story-rich places, and walks around looking up at buildings.

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