

I'm a renter. How can I use alternative energy sources?

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Until age 60, I was a renter, usually in and around Capitol Hill in Denver. For years I had carried an environmental consciousness, and chafed against the roadblocks to living as ecologically as I would like due to living in apartments or rented units in older houses. What control did I have over achieving the lowest “ecological footprint” possible under my circumstances? Well, one by one I began to discover and practice a variety of methods that could contribute to lower consumption of fossil fuels in my living situation.

First, I heard about “WindSource” through literature in my Xcel energy bill. For a relatively small addition to my monthly electric bill, I could sign up through Xcel to designate that a percentage of my electricity be generated by **wind turbines** in the state. That was easy, actually. Here's a link if you'd like to look into it:

<https://co.my.xcelenergy.com/s/renewable/windsource>.

A number of years later, I attended a couple of information sessions provided by community solar companies that were popping up, due to Colorado's legislation that Xcel (Colorado's largest utility company) must generate a certain amount of its electricity (ballooning over time) through alternative sources. So, various entrepreneurs were getting into the work of building solar “gardens” on open properties around the state. An example of this process is described in this recent NPR story:

<https://www.ktoo.org/2021/11/16/this-colorado-solar-garden-is-literally-a-farm-under-solar-panels/>.

I took the information from two or three such solar start-ups into consideration, and decided I could contribute to a lowering of green-house gases further by taking some money out of my retirement account to **buy solar panels** in one of the nearby community **solar gardens**. The company selected obtained my permission to consult with Xcel to determine my average electrical use over a two year period, and then informed me that I could cover 93% of my electricity with the purchase of seven panels, or 105% of my electricity with eight panels. I opted for the seven panels. And here are a couple of the benefits of owning these panels which are about eight miles from my home:

- Every quarter, I receive a direct deposit into my savings account of the extra electricity my panels have generated into the common electric grid, which Xcel can then use for other, non-solar households. The payments range from ~\$35 to ~\$75.
- I own the seven panels, and so, if I move elsewhere within the area served by Xcel, my electricity will still be generated by these panels. This applies even if I sell my house and go back to renting. Or, another option would be that I can sell the panels with my house, should the new owner wish to purchase them – a win-win for me (and for the Planet) either way.

As an aside, ever in pursuit of keeping my American “footprint” as low as possible, I have a **programmable thermostat** with four settings: “Wake”, “Leave”, “Return,” and “Sleep”. Thus,

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while home, it's set at 68 degrees, and while gone during the middle of the day and for "sleep", it's set at 60. I wear sweaters and warm socks, and sleep under a warm comforter.

My "clothes dryer" operates with **clothes pins and clothesline**...one of the benefits of living in sunny, breezy Colorado, I can hang my laundry outdoors most of the year, or on a wooden rack when the weather is too cold to dry it outside. I've had the wooden rack even as a renter; drying clothes indoors adds much needed humidity to my place in this dry winter climate.

A large portion of my backyard is a **vegetable garden** and several fruit trees that I planted, so that I can eat *very* locally and organically, and share the surplus with neighbors and others. Also, I can can! That is, I preserve much of my harvest with freezing or canning, providing me with winter stores and great gifts for others. As a renter, I also rented a garden plot in a **community garden** nearby. After purchasing tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and other plants at the annual **Denver Botanic Garden sale** in May, a friend asked me whether I thought I made up the purchase price (it was \$63 that year, as I recall) in what I grew. I took her challenge and kept track of my harvest that year, calculating based on organic food prices-per-pound at farmers' market and/or "health food" stores. In my 10x15' plot, I grew \$1,127 worth of produce, ranging from peas, spinach and lettuce, to four kinds of tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, beans and carrots, butternut squash and cucumbers, onion, kale, herbs, beets, and sunflowers. Some of that abundance went to homeless people in Cheesman Park, through which I biked on my way back to my apartment, and to passers-by outside the fence of the garden who stopped to ask about what was growing.

When my gas-fired water-heater went "belly-up" a couple of years ago (mid-winter, of course!), I opted for an **electric water-heater**, since my electricity is generated with wind and solar! While you have much less influence on such choices as a renter, depending on your building, perhaps you can have a conversation with the landlord/owner about the long-term benefits of electric water heat or even on-demand hot water. If nothing else, it plants a seed for thinking in new and broader ways ("for the sake of your grandkids", and all).

How To Make Solar a Reality

There are many solar companies throughout Colorado. If you own your home and are interested in getting solar panels, contact any reputable solar company or get a recommendation from a neighbor who has solar panels and is pleased with how it is working out. Once you contact a solar company, the company will typically do a house call to assess your roof's appropriateness for installing panels. This includes looking at the size (how many panels will fit on the roof), and sun exposure. The representative will provide details regarding cost of either leasing the panels or buying them. Ask about a cost/benefit analysis regarding how much your electricity bill will be reduced based on the amount of electricity your panels contribute back to the grid.

If you do not own your home, or if your roof will not benefit from solar panel installation, consider **purchasing or leasing panels in a solar garden** (also called a solar array). A solar garden is typically located on a large plot of land with excellent sun exposure where many panels can be installed on a supporting framework. Some solar gardens do not do not even require owning or leasing. [SunShare](#) is an example of this model. Contact them and request that a portion of you electricity be generated though their solar garden. If you are an Xcel customer, they arrange for your monthly bill to be split between Xcel's traditional service and SunShare's solar generated from a solar garden. Solar gardens are only able to take as many participants as they have capacity to serve, so you may be put on a waiting list. Current legislation is relatively favorable at the moment for more solar gardens to be constructed, so options should be increasing to meet the demand. Contact your legislators to encourage them to make more solar gardens available.

Everyone can use alternative energy sources. Now's the time to figure out what will work for you.