

Start Your Own Community Tool-Sharing Program

There's nothing like having the right tools to help make your projects go smoothly. But, tools can be a big investment for homeowners. When money is tight, tool costs can make or break a project. Often, we only need that 20-foot ladder once a year to clean the gutters. Many table saws sit idle in the garage for months at a time.

Some neighborhoods and communities across the country have discovered a better way—tool sharing. It is an idea that is alive and well, from small housing cooperatives in rural areas to lending programs in large cities. Many people are finding, in addition to making economic sense, tool sharing offers a way to simplify life and create community, pulling together neighbors to exchange ideas, skills and a helping hand.

The Roots of Tool Sharing

Many of today's thriving tool-sharing programs grew out of the cooperative movement of the 1970s, which spawned a proliferation of co-ops, from food to housing and energy. Tool-sharing promotes many cooperative core values: self-help, self-responsibility, equality and solidarity.

Today's tool-sharing and lending programs range from

small, informal arrangements among neighbors to large operations supporting thousands of community volunteers.

They include tools for carpentry, landscaping, woodworking and car repair, and are housed in homes, community wood shops, libraries, neighborhood centers and even warehouses. You will find the programs supporting all walks of life, from single-working mothers to farmers living off the land.

Building Community

Beyond its economic practicalities, tool sharing could be recognized as a critical approach in community building. Tools available to neighborhood residents would be an incentive to keep their properties in good condition. The lending program benefits residents by reducing the costs of maintaining and improving their homes and yards; up-keep of their properties gives neighborhood residents pride and a strong sense of community and helps them realize their neighborhood can be beautiful.

Residents who take care of their yards develop relationships with their neighbors while they are outside mowing the lawn, planting flowers or watering a garden. Statistics show when you know your

neighbors, crime rates go down.

Facing the Challenges

Even with all of the benefits of tool-sharing programs, they are not without their challenges. The common problems range from a lack of organization, funding shortages, tool maintenance, noting intricate tools often require frequent repair. The constant need for maintenance may make some tools of this sort impractical for smaller sharing programs that lack the needed maintenance skills among participants.

Tool-sharing programs also must confront funding constraints. Several programs collect tool maintenance fees, or charge fees for the late return of tools, while others rely on grants, including federally funded Community Development Block Grants, fund-raising or donations.

Tracking the fate of tools on loan is essential. Record-keeping is an important component of the program. Some tool-lending programs have turned to computer databases to help track tools on loan; otherwise, tools would end up sitting in someone's basement. In addition, some tool-sharing programs carry liability insurance, added insurance

costs could be a real problem for smaller groups without a track record of safety. Other programs require users to sign liability waivers for power tools.

Tool-Sharing Start-Up Advice

Are you thinking of starting a tool-sharing program in your community or neighborhood? Here are some helpful tips:

- Hold a meeting to find out people's needs and available resources.
- Everybody lists useful household/yard equipment they are willing to share.
- Determine the scope of the program; it is often best to start with simpler hand tools.
- Determine storage—will tools be stored in homes or in a common space, somebody's garage or basement?
- Determine how costs will be covered for tool purchases and ongoing maintenance. Are you going to collect maintenance fees and fines for late return? Are you going to apply for some mini-grants to cover start-up costs? Are you going to do some fund-raising events in your neighborhood?
- Develop a clear set of lending, repair and tool-return rules (lending guidelines).

- Develop a list of "experts" who can share skills.
- Organize a system to track checkout and return of tools.
- Assign responsibility for maintenance and repair.

Keys to Success

Whether it is simply to help neighbors down the block or to mobilize a community, virtually anyone can start a tool-sharing program. On its most basic level, sharing can be as simple as meeting, developing a list of tools and swapping contact information. Try to keep it simple—do not try to be a tool rental shop. In addition to creating maintenance headaches, larger power tools also can carry greater operating dangers, particularly for the less-skilled homeowner.

A dedicated and skilled do-it-yourselfer can go a long way toward getting a tool-sharing program off the ground. It really helps to have someone who is skilled in repair; otherwise, the tools waiting to be repaired may just pile up. A membership fee or pay-as-you-go system will fund ongoing maintenance.

Adaptation of an article by Dave Wortman from Mother Earth News Magazine, April/May 2004.

EXTENSION NEWS

P3 Intern Working at Extension



The Partners in Pollution Prevention (P3) program is a 12-week program which is part of a UNL biological systems engineering class.

This summer, P3 intern, Jeff Thiele, is working at the UNL Extension in Lancaster County. He is a senior at UNL, majoring in civil engineering with a minor in business. Jeff will visit small businesses to assess their work situations, provide research options and a detailed report on how to conserve resources. He will also be providing public education on pollution prevention to various civic groups. As another part of his internship, Jeff will be working on some dry-weather water monitoring for the City of Lincoln to help screen for illicit dumping.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the P3 program. During the first nine years, P3 interns have worked with 340 clients in over 40 Nebraska communities. The P3 program has diverted approximately 1,800 tons of solid waste from landfills, reduced hazardous waste by more than 24,500 gallons and saved clients an estimated \$6.2 million in direct savings. More information about the program is available online at <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/p3>

E-Waste: What It Is, and What You Can Do

Jeff Thiele
UNL Partners in Pollution
Prevention Intern

In today's world, it seems electronics become obsolete as soon as you purchase them. We see the benefits of technology in everyday life, but we don't see its cost: large amounts of electronic waste or e-waste. Electronic waste, or E-waste, is a growing problem for America. Millions of computers, monitors, cell phones, televisions and other electronics become outdated each year, begging the question, "What should we do with our e-waste?"

One disposal method used for e-wastes has been to place them in a landfill, which can create many problems. Many e-wastes contain harmful materials, that can enter leachate or liquids seep out of a landfill. Newer landfills are lined with a material to help prevent leachate from leaking out into the soil, but it is not fail-safe. Leachate leaking out of a landfill may end up in groundwater, a source of drinking water for approximately half of all Americans.

There are many materials in e-waste that create concern. For example, the cathode ray tube (CRT), found in many



older televisions and computer monitors, contains over four pounds of lead, which can cause damage to human nervous systems, circulatory systems and kidneys. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), our obsolete computers and monitors contain more than a billion pounds of this material.

There are other materials in e-waste that should raise concern. Mercury, which causes birth defects, neurological problems and kidney disorders, is found in e-wastes like batteries, mobile phones and some circuit boards. Chromium is also found in many circuit boards and can cause damage to DNA and other health problems. E-wastes contain many other dangerous materials and listing them all could easily fill an article.

The bottom line is throwing e-wastes into landfills is a problem, not a solution. While the Nebraska Department of

Environmental Quality (NDEQ) currently regulates e-waste created in quantities by businesses, there are currently no e-waste regulations for private consumers. However, the EPA and NDEQ encourage private consumers to find alternate uses for their e-waste. Some examples include:

- **Donate your e-waste.** Many organizations will accept usable electronics such as computers and monitors. Donations to non-profit organizations may be filed for a tax deduction. *Organizations which accept donations can be found at <http://www.ci.lincoln.ne.us/city/health/environ/pollu/waste/pdf/computer.pdf>*
- **Recycle your e-waste.** Much of the material in e-waste can be recycled for use in new electronics. While recycling often has a service charge, recycling helps protect the environment and makes better use of our resources. *Local recycling service providers can be found at <http://www.wastecapne.org/pub/2006/guidebook.shtml>*
- **Buy green.** Purchase electronics environmentally friendly. *Information can be found for electronics and other products online at: <http://www.epa.gov/epp/pubs/electronics/electronics6.htm>*