

THE GARAGE

Garage presents the worst oil picture

There is the fuel demand of three cars and the place is loaded with plastic, all made from oil.

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The garage is home to our most profligate petroleum users. No, we don't have a set of gas-guzzling SUVs, but we do have three cars.

Inside, there's a 1995 Mazda Miata (our fun convertible), a 2001 Acura TL sedan (mine) and a 2003 Chrysler PT Cruiser Turbo (my husband's wheels). Nothing helpful on the fuel-efficiency front. On the other hand, our mileage is probably below that of many dual-income households -- especially for Southern California.

The Miata rarely moves. The PT has a round-trip commute of 10 miles. I work at home several days a week, a zero-mile commute.

On the other days, I usually take an Amtrak or Metrolink train for the 110-mile trip to downtown Los Angeles, then a shuttle bus to the office.

We're pretty boring, so our non-work travel is mostly limited to errands, which we try to plot roughly to save time and fuel. We have an air compressor handy for properly inflated tires (a fuel-saver). And we'll see if our cars can go 5,000 miles between oil changes instead of the commonly recommended 3,000 miles. (Many cars can; check your owners manual.)

Until one of the chariots has to be replaced, that's the best we can do on the vehicle front.

Nearby, I spot the gas-powered lawn mower and figure I'll press for an electric version when that one dies. Because I'm not doing the mowing, I don't have standing to push for one with no engine at all.

Other garage items with links to petroleum: plastic storage bins and cabinets, plastic tool boxes, plastic-handled tools, plastic watering jugs, plastic-coated wire shelving, plastic garbage cans, plastic cat carrier and so on. When it's time to replace that stuff, I'll search for substitutes on California's recycled products directory (www.ciwmb.ca.gov/RCP/) and other Internet sites.

For now, I'm not going to discuss a certain person's favorite gardening and car-cleaning products, or the multiple sets of golf clubs with plastic employed here and there. He gets credit for using biodegradable tees and being a good water steward (that must count for something on the green karma scale). In return, I hope to get some slack on the plastic bags that arrive daily, protecting my cherished newspapers from sprinklers, rain and such. Bags and newspapers go in the recycling bin.

We don't have air conditioning, but our furnace is old and we'll need to replace it soon, so I'll look for an energy-saving replacement. Same with our water heater. During a tour Monday of his Studio City house, actor/environmentalist Ed Begley Jr. showed me his solar hot water heater, which was being replaced that day after nearly 20 years of service.

When I told him I might be in the market soon, he pointed to his backup, a super-efficient gas water heater made by A.O. Smith. As Begley knows, going the solar route isn't cheap, even with subsidies, and I would still need a standard water heater to back up the solar unit.

As for the cleaning products and pest-killers we've amassed in the garage, I've already found some less-

toxic things to try, but it's unclear how much petroleum consumption I'll wipe out in the switch.

Companies such as Seventh Generation sell organic cleaners, but given the properties inherent in any effective cleaner, they're mostly packaged in standard plastic bottles. Begley's Best, a line of natural cleaners sold by Begley, is no exception.

"People have suggested I use a corn-based polymer, but I want to test it first since I have a lot of citrus in my formula," Begley said. A corn-based bottle is biodegradable, he noted, "and I don't want it to break down on the shelf."

I'm good with that.