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Christine Woodside Updates Energy Independence Book

by Suzanne Thompson

Don't get too complacent with gasoline prices below \$2 a gallon, cautions environmental reporter and author Christine Woodside. If there's one thing Americans should have realized, with the past summer's \$4 a gallon sticker shock, is that the world's oil reserves are dipping ever lower, and we're going to have to change our ways because of it.

"Sometime in the next couple of generations, [oil] won't be the cheapest and most efficient way to power the majority of society," the award-winning journalist and Deep River resident writes in her updated edition of *Energy Independence, Your Everyday Guide to Reducing Fuel Consumption*, published by The Lyons Press, Guilford.

The point is to be proactive now about kicking our oil dependence, according to Woodside, who first published the handbook three years ago for anyone, urbanite, suburbanite or rural dweller, who was looking to change their energy-consuming ways.

"We know now too much to make fun of alternative energy as something for latter-day hippies living in yurts," writes Woodside, whose works have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Woman's Day*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *Hartford Courant*.

Woodside thought she, her husband and two daughters were already living an energy-frugal lifestyle in their 1,100 square foot old Victorian home by turning off lights, minimizing television time and turning down thermostats. She got frustrated a few years back as Connecticut's electricity costs increased to 13 cent per kilowatt-hour. Those rates, she points out, have risen to almost 19 cents per kilowatt-hour today. So even after reducing their energy use, residents have seen their bills stay the same or continue to increase.

In scrutinizing her household energy bills, checking out appliance use rates and Energy Star ratings, Woodside has compiled useful, fact-based information for the rest of us efficiency wanna'-be's. Not only can we use this information to improve our own energy efficiency, perhaps we can end some household debates about giving up with practices and appliances really will save energy in the long-run.

The 180-plus page paperback book is organized into ten chapters, from an explanation of how oil still rules as our go-to source for energy, to demystifying solar energy, installing wind generators at home to latest updates on fuel cells, biodiesel and geothermal heat pumps, plus the merits of heating with good old-fashioned wood.

Wood is an excellent fuel source for New England, and can be burned efficiently, points out Woodside, who also edits *Connecticut Woodlands*, the magazine of the Connecticut Forest & Parks Association. Wind generators aren't that feasible in our state, but are

solid options in high-wind regions of the country. Since Woodside's book was published, funding for Connecticut's solar energy rebate program, one of the most attractive in the country, has all but maxed out.

Bottom line, Woodside says that Americans, the biggest energy-users in the world, will need to learn to think and act in new ways. Growing up as a New Jersey suburbanite, she admits that she didn't give nature a second thought until she visited the White Mountains in New Hampshire. Years later, she considers it her duty, as a journalist, to help other Americans learn to change our ways.

"The alternative energy sources won't allow us to simply plug our energy-gobbling ways of life into new technology. We're going to have to learn to use less electricity and fuel than we've been enjoying," she writes.

Basic restraint is the ordinary person's best strategy to cut energy use, according to Woodside, who makes "change behavior" palatable, even for computer-using, TV-addicted households, with sage advice to put electronics on power strips, which get turned off if the machine is idle for a couple of hours, and certainly overnight.

A computer uses the same amount of energy to turn on as it does to operate for about two seconds, according to Woodside, and don't worry about wearing out the on-off switch. The unit will be obsolete before that happens. Turn off the PC monitor if you step away for 20 minutes or more.

While giving readers tools to analyze their own energy bills and charts to compare energy efficiency of hybrid cars to lower mileage gasoline-powered cars, Woodside also provides both compelling environmental reasons and energy-saving calculations to back up recommendations such as these:

- Turn off lights and keep switching to compact fluorescent bulbs. One-third of U.S. electricity gets used for lighting. Powering a single incandescent light bulb over its lifespan requires burning eighty-ton pounds of coal, about 100 times the amount needed to power a CF bulb.
- If you can, switch from electric to propane stoves. Although you're still burning a fossil fuel, it's much cheaper and emissions are minimal.
- Give up the microwave oven. Although it might be the most cost-effective way to bake a casserole, most of us use our microwaves inefficiently to boil water or thaw out something.
- Anything that uses heat uses a tremendous amount of power. Try living without clothes or hair dryers. Woodside isn't recommending civil disobedience if your neighborhood restricts outdoor clotheslines. Use indoor drying racks.

- Shop for appliances based on Energy Star ratings, required by the government. Front-loading washers use less water than top loads; replace refrigerators and freezers that are ten years or older with newer, more efficient ones.
- Drive your car less. Although America's transportation infrastructure is car-centric, and fuel prices may feel "cheap" right now, Woodside reminds us that we should still think about walking, biking, and taking the train or bus whenever and wherever possible.

Energy Independence is available through www.LyonsPress.com, other online sources and area bookstores.

Woodside also is editor of *Appalachia*, the longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation, published by the Appalachian Mountain Club, America's oldest nonprofit conservation and recreation organization. <http://www.outdoors.org>. Go to <http://www.ctwoodlands.org> for the Connecticut Forest & Parks Association.

Catch the Sunday, Jan. 25, 7 a.m. replay of Christine Woodside on my CT Outdoors radio show on WLIS 1420 AM, Old Saybrook and WMRD 1150 AM, Middletown. Go to www.wliswmrd.net for show listings and upcoming guests.

When she's not writing or talking, Suzanne can be found puttering around her gardens in Old Lyme. Contact Suzanne at sthompson@wliswmrd.net.