

Wells Branch / Brattonwood greenZine™

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What's Up in the MUD

Summer continues to stress our homes, lawns, cars and nerves. With weeks on end at or above 100°, anyone who still has a perfectly green lawn either has shade trees or a pretty high water bill.

This month was supposed to be the 3rd edition of the greenZine, but my business seems to take more time than planned. Finally I have the time to put into writing this newsletter, which I hope will provide my neighbors here in the Wells Branch MUD area with helpful tips on saving money, energy and improving your lives.

Earlier this summer I caught sight of a house on Gaylord with solar power. The installation was performed by Celestial Power, LLC, a newcomer to the Austin solar power market. That brings to three the number of solar power systems in and around the MUD – mine on Jack's Pond Road, the one on Gaylord, and an older system on Town Hill Drive. Let me know if you see any others.

I'm also seeing more home owners installing solar powered landscape lights. Much easier than having an electrical contractor dig up your yard and bury wiring in and around your shrubs, only to have a dog dig them up. Plus, they

run on sunshine, not a 300 or 600 watt transformer, plugged into an outlet somewhere.

The new jogging trail in the electric transmission easement west of Single Trace appears to have been completed earlier this year, adding greatly to the number of hike and bike trails in the Wells Branch area. It looks to be a ½ mile jogging track, but with the temperature as high as it's been, it feels more like 2 or 3 miles.

Dealing with the Drought

Whoever allowed St. Augustine grass to be planted in this area needs a good talkin' to. More ideally suited for the wetter parts of Texas, like Houston, St. Augustine is the builder's choice because it's cheap and it goes down much easier than more drought tolerant grasses.

In this part of Texas there are two things that are certain – dead lawns and high water bills. The best way to water your lawn is late in the evening after the sun has gone down, and deeply. Too early in the day and evaporation will carry away much of the water and too shallow and the grass won't be trained to grow deep roots. Invest in a good remote thermometer and hygrometer – the higher the out-

door relative humidity, the less water will be lost to evaporation.

And the best time to mow your lawn is earlier in the day, preferably just after any dew has evaporated. Assuming there was dew fall overnight – which is assuming a lot this time of year.

Grass should be dry to the touch to prevent damage to the lawn and your lawn mower. And speaking of early in the morning, if you're looking for a new lawn mower, do your neighbors a favor and look into one of the electric mowers, such as Black & Decker's 20" rechargeable. It uses no gasoline, so no need to store flammable liquids in your hot garage (or run down to the gas station because you've run out), and makes very little noise. Black and Decker has a full line of rechargeable lawn and garden tools. They recharge for pennies, compared to the price of gasoline for mowers, string trimmers, edgers, leaf blowers, and the rest of your gas guzzling tools. Plus they don't make noise, ruin your hearing, or pollute.

Beating the Heat

I leave the A/C off as long as I can because I know that once the weather warms up enough for it to run, it isn't going to stop until October. It's too late in the season for a preventative tune-up, but if your system isn't quite working the way it should, now would be a good time to have one done anyway. I regularly hear air conditioners on their last legs when I'm walking at night and now is not the time to have yours break down.

With air conditioning a major expense this time of year, there are things you can do to cut down on costs –

1. Change your filters every 30 days during peak air conditioning season. A dirty filter makes your air conditioner work harder, adding even more money to that electric bill.
2. Keep the grass trimmed around your air conditioning compressor. Grass clippings and dirt can clog the coil, causing it to work harder. You can clean the coils with a garden hose, if grass or dirt does become a problem. Be sure to turn the A/C off or the water will get sucked up by the fan and blown back at you. Keep the string trimmer away from the coils, too – you don't want to damage the fins.
3. Buy and use a programmable thermostat. Turning the temperature up when you're away from home saves money. But not too high – too much heat can dry out the finish on your furniture. If you have City of Austin electricity, you may also qualify for a discounted electric rate if you allow them to turn your A/C off or down during peak electric demand periods.

If your old unit is in need of replacing, give the sales staff at Strand Brothers a call. They replaced my 14 SEER ("SEER" is a measure of efficiency, the higher the better) unit last summer with a 20.5 SEER unit. My house cools faster, and costs much less to operate. Good-bye \$280 electric bills in the summer. Most older homes in the MUD with original air conditioners have 14

SEER or lower units. There are utility rebates and federal tax credits, making the replacement cost even more affordable.

Lights at Night

Nothing perks up a house more at night than decorative lighting. I have solar powered spots on my shrubs, street address numbers, and down part of my back fence, so I can sit out in the yard and see the stars, without tripping over myself.

For applications where nothing but a light bulb will do, compact fluorescent bulbs are the only way to go. They aren't just for inside your house anymore, they are now made in yellow "Bug Light", PAR 38 flood lamp, and candelabra base for decorative porch lights. Three 40 watt candelabra bulbs in a porch light use almost as much electricity a year, if left on an average of 12 hours a day, as an old, energy inefficient refrigerator. Ouch. Add a couple of 60 or 75 watt bulbs by the garage door, and a 100 watt PAR 38 security light, and you've got a real energy nightmare. The Lowe's store in Round Rock carries an excellent selection of CFLs in all shapes and sizes. Or check out the blog store if you'd rather shop on-line – URL at the end.

Next Issue

What's up for the next issue? With kids heading back to school and the sun going down sooner, I'm going to talk about ways to cut down on your energy use in the evening, and stay comfortable at the same time.

September also means cooler temperatures and I'm going to talk about getting your furnace checked out before the first cool nights of the Fall.

And with those cooler days and nights, some recommendations for landscaping and outdoor lighting that can keep your house cooler next year and make it more attractive and secure.

We're Sad to See You Go

I've lived in the Wells Branch area for longer than FM 1325 has had a third as many lanes as it does now – and that's not counting the toll road. So I know how great it is to live in this part of the Austin area, but sometimes a move is in order. If you want to continue receiving the *greenZine* after you leave, or even if you have a friend outside the Wells Branch area who'd like to receive our newsletter, send us the address to sales@greenhousepc.com. It's \$12 a year to cover the cost of non-bulk rate postage. If you're in the Wells Branch area and aren't receiving the *greenZine* yet, drop me your name and address and I'll get you added right away. Others will be added as time and business permits.

Services for Real Estate Agents

"Green" is in and I know from speaking to real estate agents that many of you are being asked about "green" houses for sale in your area. Whether it's help making changes, pointers for greening up an existing home to help move it, or help in locating a home for sale that is appropriate for solar power, we're here to help.

Your Ad Here

If you live and work in the Wells Branch area and have a business you'd like to advertise in the *greenZine*, you can drop us an e-mail – sales@greenhousepc.com. Shopping locally is a great way to save time, money and gasoline.

Ad rates will be based on column inches, with deep discounts for environmentally friendly businesses.

Featured Business

They aren't in Wells Branch, but they are one of the greenest business going. I'm talking about *Alien Scooters* at 1122-B S. Lamar, across the river. If you've seen me riding my maroon *Vectrix* electric motorcycle around the MUD, that's where I picked it up. With products ranging from electrically assisted street and mountain bikes, to MoPeds and 30MPH scooters, up to my highway-capable *Vectrix*, they have something for just about everyone.

<http://www.alienscooters.com/>

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About greenHouse Computers

greenHouse Computers, LLC is committed to energy conservation and renewable energy. We produce a line of very low power, "green" computers, as well as software for renewable energy system management. We offer help reducing residential electric consumption through the use of high-efficiency lighting and appliances, as well as design consultation for solar power systems.

Free tips on energy conservation can be found on the company blog – <http://www.greenhousepc.com/blog> – and in our monthly *greenZine*. You're welcome to read along, join in or suggest a future topic.

Products mentioned here can be found in our blog store – <http://www.greenhousepc.com/>, then click the "Blog Store" link. I don't get paid to recommend products, and I won't recommend anything that isn't worth the price.