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THE GREEN GIRL

The Green Girl's Guide to hybrid cars

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Who has the cooler car? The guy behind the wheel of a gas-saving hybrid car or the woman driving that megalithic SUV?

If you said "the guy with the hybrid," keep reading. We've got tips on buying hybrids and some information that may surprise you.



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(If you opted for "woman with the SUV," good luck with that gas bill!)

Hybrids will definitely save you money at the pump. The EPA rates the Toyota Prius at 48 miles per gallon in city driving and 45 on the highway. That's about twice the mileage you can expect from a standard mid-size car. Hybrid vehicles get better mileage in city driving because the gas-powered engine of the hybrid shuts off at every stoplight.

However, savings at the pump are negated by hybrids' higher prices. On average, hybrids cost about \$2,000 more than conventional cars. To break even or save money, you will need to keep your hybrid six to eight years.

But if your definition of "good value for the money" includes the environment, then the hybrid is the much better deal. Even a small increase in fuel economy makes a large difference in emissions over the life of a car.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, each gallon of gas your car burns releases approximately 19 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (22 pounds for diesel). By switching from a gas powered vehicle to a hybrid, you can save the earth a couple of tons of greenhouse gases. Now that's the kind of savings we can endorse!

In cities, hybrids make an even larger difference. They produce very few emissions during low-speed city driving and the inevitable stop-and-go traffic. Research, conducted by the EPA, has shown that a hybrid can cut emissions by 25 to 35 percent over even the most fuel-efficient gas-powered models.

Now that's cool!

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Supplemented by Susan Toth and staff members of Pine Jog Environmental Education Center, West Palm Beach, in association with Florida Atlantic University. For more information, go to www.pinejog.fau.edu.

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