

The Top Ten Greenest Cities

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It's not easy being green -- for a city, that is. It's tough enough to simply keep up with the endless trash, traffic and pollution generated by urban life. To actually get the better of it with good public transportation, smart recycling programs and the kind of well-kept streets, parks and playgrounds that make cities fun and healthful places to live, that's the true challenge. So who measures up?

We've picked 10 places -- in no particular order -- that we think are doing a great job at putting residents first. That means they're obsessed with clean air and clean water, renewable energy, reliable city buses, trams, streetcars and subways, a growing number of parks and greenbelts, farmer's markets and, very important, opportunities for community involvement.

[Portland, Oregon](#)

Affordable and accessible, this city straddling the banks of the Willamette River has long made sustainable living a priority. More than 30 years ago, with other cities in a freeway-building frenzy, [Portland](#) broke ranks and tore down a six-lane expressway to make room for a waterfront park. Since then the city has set an urban growth boundary to protect 25 million acres of forest and farmland, started a solid-waste program that recycles more than half of the city's trash and erected more than 50 public buildings that meet tough standards set by the United States Green Building Council. One of the most bike-friendly cities in the U.S., [Portland](#)'s public transportation systems boasts a high rate of ridership. Add in one of the nation's largest city parks -- the aptly named Forest Park has 74 miles of running, biking and hiking trails -- and [Portland](#)'s rep as the nation's greenest city makes sense.

[Austin, Texas](#)

Home to the first Whole Foods Market and more than 300 days of sunshine a year (and you thought this city was all about the music) [Austin](#) spreads out among 205 parks, 14 nature preserves, and 25 greenbelts. Talk about green. The city plans to meet 20 percent of its energy needs with renewable energy and energy efficiency by 2020. Factor in county laws protecting the region's natural watershed from development, a recycling center that dates back to 1970, a dozen outdoor farmer's markets, city buses that offer free rides on 'high ozone' days and an innovative "pay-as-you-throw" trash collection program that rewards residents for being less wasteful and [Austin](#) easily earns a spot on the Green List.

[Minneapolis, Minnesota](#)

Named one of the top business districts in the nation for by the Environmental Protection Agency, [Minneapolis](#) is a commuter's paradise where more than 60 percent of downtown workers use public or alternative transportation to get to the office. Free parking for registered van and car pools, an extensive bike path and bike lane system and employer-sponsored showers and locker rooms not only add endorphins but make a significant dent into auto-based air pollution. On the way to work, commuters thread their way among scores of lakes and parks and ponds and greenbelts and more than 200,000 trees. With great drinking water, active community organizations and the Minnesota State Department of Commerce nudging businesses and residents to hook solar systems up to the city's grid, it doesn't take Mary Tyler Moore tossing her beret into the air to let you know this is a great place to live.

[Boulder](#), Colorado

Being green has been a way of life in this small Rocky Mountain city ever since prescient city planners started preserving parkland in 1898. Today, with more than 42,000 acres of pristine land cushioning the city from urban sprawl, [Boulder](#) is a place where hiking trails, rock-climbing areas, picnic spots and fishing holes are within reach of every resident. But there's more to this city than just a pretty face. It's a place where more than 90 percent of residents recycle, where new water meters are not allowed above certain elevation, thus protecting ridgelines and peaks, and where, when recent federal tax cuts gutted city budgets, residents voted themselves a third sales-tax hike to raise \$51 million to buy and protect even more open land.

[Burlington](#), Vermont

In this small city on Lake Champlain, community pride and responsibility drive the urge to be green. More than one-third of all energy used in the city comes from renewable resources, an impressive statistic in chilly New England. [Burlington](#) laws don't allow the use of pesticides on public parks, land or waterways. Challenged by their local leaders to come up with environmental priorities and solutions to existing problems, residents formed an extensive network of citizen-based groups that take on everything from environmental programs to clean up toxic sites to watchdog groups to monitor pollution in Lake Champlain. With local agriculture a mainstay of the region, schools are switching to locally- and organically-grown foods. The idea of sustainability is becoming part of the school curriculum so, as [Burlington](#)'s children grow and take their places in the community -- any community -- they can take a greener way of thinking along with them.

[Madison](#), Wisconsin

[Madison](#) was the first city in the United States to offer curbside recycling (and one of the few with a university course on ice cream making), and its 15,000 acres of lakes and 6,000 acres of parkland give it great appeal. Drawn by the natural beauty, residents seem determined to help preserve it. The recycling program gets a whopping 97 percent participation, with 265 tons of material -- everything from broken washers to empty beer cans to grass clippings -- collected each week. A year-round farmer's market (held indoors in the frigid winter months) draws vendors and buyers from throughout the fertile

region. As a result, organic and local-grown foods are a priority. This bike-friendly city with more than 100 miles of bike paths ranks high in air quality, no surprise in a place where there are three bikes for every car.

[New York](#), New York

Surprise! Thanks to its storied (and widely used) public transportation, energy-efficient housing and good water quality, New York rates a place among the nation's green cities. Central Park makes it even greener. Considered a folly of epic proportions when its 843 swampy, muddy acres were set aside in the 1850s, Central Park is a wilderness within the urban core. More than 80 percent of NYC residents use public transportation, something that earns the city bragging rights. In fact, New Yorkers burn gasoline at the rate the U.S. did in the 1920s. The key to the city's low use of fossil fuels, pesticides and other energy sources is population density. Calculated by square foot, [New York](#) uses as much energy and produces as much solid waste as any city. Calculate by population, however, and the numbers shift. Per capita, New Yorkers use fewer resources and put less pressure on their surroundings than any other city of its size. So welcome to the Big Green Apple.

[San Francisco](#), California

To the superlatives the City by the Bay has acquired over the decades -- steepest, foggiest, most expensive -- add greenest. With bus, subway and ferry services that reach throughout the Bay Area, avid bikers and devoted car poolers, [San Francisco](#) has a good track record for getting people out of their cars. In fact, more than half the city's residents use public or alternative transportation to get to work. With Golden Gate Park, the newly-decommissioned Presidio, beaches, extensive bike paths and access to the Pacific and the Bay, the city has an abundance of recreational options. Prevailing winds from the water help keep pollution at bay. The city is also a leader in green building, with more than 20 building projects registered for official green certification. And city residents are willing to tax themselves. Voters said yes to allowing the city to sell \$100 million in revenue bonds to support renewable energy.

[Santa Monica](#), California

Just 12 years ago, the environmental future of this seaside city looked unimpressive. Thanks to an active city council, which wrote and enacted the Sustainable City Plan, [Santa Monica](#) has turned green. Three of every four of the city's public works vehicles run on alternative fuel, making it among the largest such fleets in the country. All public buildings use renewable energy. In the last 15 years, the city has cut greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 10 percent, a feat in car-crazy Southern California. City officials and residents have made the ongoing cleanup of the Santa Monica Bay a priority -- an urban runoff facility catches 3.5 million gallons of water each week that would otherwise flow into the bay. Add in the miles of beaches, extensive curbside recycling, farmer's markets, community gardens, the city's nimble bus system and [Santa Monica](#) is clearly more than just another bathing beauty.

[Chicago](#), Illinois

With open space, public transportation and a commitment to renewable and sustainable energy, [Chicago](#) has earned a spot on numerous 'greenest city' lists. The city has 42 green-certified building projects, with more to come. All of the city's nine museums and the Art Institute of [Chicago](#) have been converted to run partially on solar power. Close to one-third of all residents use public transportation to get to work. Among the city's energy goals, likely to be met, is buying 20 percent of its electricity from renewable energy sources this year. City officials have voted to give tax incentives to homeowners who invest in [Chicago](#)'s many historic homes and retrofit them with energy efficient heating and cooling systems, as well as water-saving plumbing. Water quality on the city's lakefront is rated as excellent by the Natural Resources Defense Council, a happy detail for all the swimmers, boaters and sun bathers along the shore in the summer. And you thought it was all about Oprah.