

A few notes and tips on living low waste

By: Morgan Conover

A New Year's Resolution you might consider adopting this year is producing less waste in your day-to-day life. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, in 2018 the average American produced 4.9 pounds of municipal solid waste **per day**. Below are a few notes and tips for living a more low-waste lifestyle, from beginner to intermediate to advanced.

For one week, don't change your behavior at all. Simply observe your daily habits without judgement, paying special attention to what you throw away. Only through increased awareness can you change your habits for the better. Most of the waste we produce isn't malicious, just mindless.

Rethink → your choices

Refuse → single use

Reduce → consumption

Reuse → everything

Refill → when you can

Refurbish → old stuff

Repair → before you replace

Repurpose → be creative and reinvent

Recycle → last option

Beginner

- Refuse plastic bags. If you get a few small items at CVS, for example, carry them home or put in your pockets. The average use time of a plastic bag is about 7 minutes, but the bag will last at least a couple hundred years in the environment and can damage the health of living plants and animals.
- For shopping (particularly grocery shopping, but at all places where you buy more than you carry), keep reusable bags in your car. If you don't have a car, checkout [Chicobags](#), which stuff down into manageable sacks. Reusable bags are not only better for the environment, they are sturdier than plastic bags.
- Buy a reusable coffee mug and a reusable water bottle. I recommend [hydro flask](#) or [yeti](#). [Glass bottles](#) work great too. Disposable paper coffee cups actually contain an inner plastic lining that prevents the paper from disintegrating from the liquid. This is why it's considered a single-use plastic. It's very difficult and not economically feasible to recycle it because the plastic lining and paper must first be separated to recycle it. The cup from a coffee you enjoy for around 30 minutes will last at least a couple hundred years in the environment. Also, think about pouring a hot liquid into plastic. It has the potential to leach chemicals into your coffee. For example, you'll probably notice that most plastic containers now advertise that they're "BPA Free". BPA is bisphenol-A, which was found to mimic the hormone estrogen and has a significant impact on fetuses and infants (BPA used to be a common component in baby bottles). Even so, replacements for BPA include bisphenol S and bisphenol F, but there's debate as to whether these are actually safer than BPA. Not only is using a reusable mug with a stainless-steel or glass

inner lining more eco-friendly, it will keep your coffee hotter for longer and you don't have to worry about ingesting any potentially harmful chemicals.

- If you like using straws, consider getting glass, stainless steel, or bamboo straws. I prefer glass ones because they make cleaning easier.
- An easy low waste kitchen swap is to use a wooden brush for washing dishes, [like this one](#). With this one you have to buy the handle once and [can buy replacement heads](#). Old replacement heads are compostable. Other options for washing dishes are a [wooden pot brush](#), bamboo pot scraper, [narrow neck bottle brush](#), and [Swedish sponge clothes](#).
- If you use manual toothbrushes, try compostable bamboo ones instead [like these from Earth Hero](#).
- If you need something new, first check Craigslist or other platform where people buy/sell used items. This especially works if you're looking for a specific item and search for it. Not only will this save you money, it will lessen consumption through reuse.
- Try a French press for making coffee at home. French presses use no filters and are super easy to use. Alternatively, if you already have a K-cup machine, try out reusable K-cup holders. You put the ground coffee into the holder and run the machine normally. Both of these options allow more choice in your coffee because you don't have to choose only the coffee available in K-cups. You could also ground your own coffee beans at home for a fresher brew.
- Cloth napkins are a better alternative to paper napkins. It also feels fancier to use cloth napkins at home for meals.

Intermediate

- Invest in a safety razor. I personally use an [Albatross](#) razor. It's \$30 for the Flagship Butterfly razor, but if you take care of it, it will last your entire lifetime. A 10-pack of replacement blades costs \$2.50. The blades are double sided. Albatross also has a [Blade Take Back Program](#) where they upcycle used razor blades into new products like utensils. Not all municipal recycling companies accept razor blades.
- To limit use of paper towels, keep only 1 to 2 rolls in your home and hide them from plain view, such as in a cabinet. Use microfiber towels instead ([\\$10 for 10 at Bed, Bath, & Beyond](#)). Another option is to use "unpaper towels", which are sold on Etsy from shops like [Marley's Monsters](#).
- Get a [Misto](#) or other refillable oil-sprayer, which saves aerosol cans from the landfill.
- Grow your own herbs in your kitchen. It's hard to find herbs not sold in plastic. By growing your own, not only are you ensuring they are organically grown, but you don't have to go to the grocery store to buy them.
- Handkerchiefs have a bad rap because the perception is that people constantly reuse them and put them back in their pocket covered in snot. If you're cool with this, good for you! Another option is to use reusable cloth wipes just once or twice. You can even store them in a tissue dispenser. Keep a hamper in the bathroom so you can throw them in the wash when you're done.
- Instead of dryer sheets, consider using [wool dryer balls](#). They serve the same purpose as dryer sheets and are compostable.
- Instead of using aluminum foil or parchment paper for baking and oven cooking, consider buying a reusable silicone baking mat. They are dishwasher safe as well. [Some options here](#).

- Consider using a shampoo bar and a conditioner bar. [Lush Cosmetics](#) and [Ethique](#) sell good ones. If you live locally, Mason & Greens also has refillable shampoo, conditioner, and shower gel. Simply bring your own container, have the staff tare the container, fill it up with product, and purchase the product. This way you are only buying what you need.

Advanced

- Buy natural clothing materials such as cotton, hemp, linen, jute, and bamboo. Synthetic fabrics, such as polyester, nylon, acrylic, spandex, and rayon create microplastics. Every time you wash your clothes made of these synthetic materials, they release microplastics that make their way into the water stream. To prevent this, consider washing these items in a bag that prevents release of microplastics [like this one](#) or using a microfiber filter ([some options here](#)).
- Get a bidet! Forgo toilet paper by only using a bidet and reusable cloth wipes to dry yourself off after using the bidet (although some bidets have heated air dryers built in). If you prefer to use toilet paper, consider switching to a brand that doesn't cut down virgin trees to produce the toilet paper and uses recycled paper instead. Good options include [Who Gives a Crap](#), [Plant Paper](#), [Seventh Generation](#), [Reel Bamboo Toilet Paper](#), and [Green Forest](#).
- For the ladies—try a menstrual cup or [Thinx period underwear](#). If these are not comfortable for you, check out [Lola](#), which makes 100% cotton tampons, or [Tree Hugger cloth pads](#).
- If you have a baby or are planning to have a baby, try cloth diapers. There's so many types out there these days. While the cost up-front is higher than disposable diapers, some people have estimated they saved \$2,500 from using cloth diapers for their child's diaper years over buying disposable diapers. Check out these cloth diaper brands: [Best Bottom](#), [BumGenius](#), [La Petite Ourse](#), [Green Mountain Diapers](#), [Thirsties](#), and [Esembly](#). Cloth wipes are also an eco-friendly option. Here's a [good diaper solution](#) for cloth wipes (although I recommend no essential oils—they are not good for baby's skin).
- There are a few low waste water filter options out there instead of a Brita. One is [charcoal sticks like these](#), which are compostable. Or you can crush them into pieces and add them to your garden. Another more expensive option is the [Berkey water filter](#).

Resources

Best local places (DC, Maryland, Virginia) to shop zero/low waste:

- Mason & Greens in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia: <https://www.masonandgreens.com/>
- Sun & Earth in Annapolis, Maryland: <http://sunandearth.biz/>
- MOM's Organic Market (multiple locations): <https://momsorganicmarket.com/>
 - *Note:* They are doing recycling of holiday lights now through January 31st at any of their locations.

If you live outside of DC, Maryland, and Virginia, check this website for state-by-state local zero-waste stores: <https://www.litterless.com/wheretoshop>

Online places to shop zero/low waste:

- Earth Hero: <https://earthhero.com/>
- Dropps (best place to buy laundry detergent and dishwasher detergent pods—combines convenient pods with eco-friendly detergents): <https://www.dropps.com/>
- Wild Minimalist: <https://wildminimalist.com/>
- Life Without Plastic: <https://lifewithoutplastic.com/>
- Etsy

Books:

- *Zero Waste Home* by Bea Johnson
- *The Story of Stuff: The Impact of Overconsumption on the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—How We Can Make It Better* by Annie Leonard
- *Simply Living Well* by Julia Watkins
- *F**k Plastic: 101 Ways to Free Yourself from Plastic and Save the World* by Surfers Against Sewage
- *The Wondrous Workings of Plant Earth: Understanding Our World and Its Ecosystems* by Rachel Ignotofsky
- *The Future of Packaging: From Linear to Circular* by Tom Szaky
- *101 Ways to Go Zero Waste* by Kathryn Kellogg
- *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story* by Susan Freinkel
- *Plastic Purge: How to Use Less Plastic, Eat Better, Keep Toxins Out of Your Body, and Help Save the Sea Turtles!* By Michael SanClements
- *Composting for a New Generation: Latest Techniques for the Bin and Beyond* by Michelle Balz
- *The Rodale Book of Composting* by Grace Gershuny and Deborah L. Martin