

## B.Y.O.B. (Bring Your Own Bag)

“Paper or plastic?” may soon go down in history alongside other abandoned phrases like “Smoking or non-smoking?” and “Leaded or unleaded?” as cities, countries and businesses eliminate the ubiquitous non-biodegradable plastic bag from cityscapes, waterways and landfills. Whole Foods Market has been in the spotlight over the last few weeks for its decision to phase out single-use plastic bags at checkout, but it was the city of San Francisco that was the first in the U.S. to require grocers and pharmacies to provide biodegradable or reusable bags. Around the world, a tax on plastic bags in Ireland cut use by 90%, Uganda and Rwanda prohibit bags completely, and Taiwan and now China have banned the distribution of free disposable plastic bags.

While one bag may seem like a trivial thing, those "free" plastic bags we get at supermarkets, department stores and restaurants are actually contributing to a worldwide pandemic of plastic waste. The Wall Street Journal estimated 12 million barrels of oil (the equivalent of 240 million gallons of gasoline) are used to manufacture the 100 billion plastic bags consumed in the U.S. every year. The city of San Francisco estimates each plastic bag costs the city 17 cents in terms of litter clean-up, damage to recycling equipment, death of sea life, and damage to marine ecosystems, making these bags anything but free.

So what can you do to reduce this plastic plague? The most effective way of reducing the amount of plastic litter in our environment is to reduce our consumption. As consumers, rather than wait for our governments to tackle the plastic bag issue, we can change our habits: Take your own reusable bags when you shop and refuse bags for those smaller purchases you can just carry out by hand. It takes a couple of times to remember to pack your reusable bags into your car (or bike) and then bring them into the store, but with time, as everything else, it becomes part of your routine. And, as an added benefit, you can reclaim that space under your kitchen sink or in your pantry where those former plastic bags multiplied like rabbits.

Reusable bags are popping up in more and more places and your choices for material, size and style keep expanding, running the gamut from fashionable to practical. You can purchase these bags at your local grocer, at local thrift stores and even at community events to support many worthy causes. They also make great gifts.

Every day at the recycling center, I am asked where plastic bags can be recycled. Plastic bags are tricky to recycle, and are considered a “hard-to-recycle” material—another reason to reduce their use. To be recycled, plastic bags MUST be clean, dry, and empty—no food scraps, no receipts, and no moisture. Not all plastic bags are recyclable so look for the chasing arrow triangle symbol with a #2 or #4 to know if you have the right type of bag. Local Broomfield supermarkets, like King Soopers on Hwy. 287 N, Safeway on 120<sup>th</sup> St. and Wal-Mart in the Flatirons Mall, all have containers to collect plastic bags to be recycled into plastic lumber. Plastic bags can also be taken year-round to the Eco-Cycle Center for Hard-to-Recycle Materials ([www.ecocycle.org](http://www.ecocycle.org)) in Boulder. Or, you can hold on to your bags until Eco-Cycle’s annual Hard-to-Recycle Round up at the Broomfield Recycling Center, this year on Saturday, April 12<sup>th</sup> from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

only. For the full details on this event and all the materials accepted, check out [www.ecocycle.org/charm/roundups.cfm](http://www.ecocycle.org/charm/roundups.cfm).

Plastic bags are not accepted through any local curbside recycling program or at any other drop-off center because they are so easily contaminated by other materials. Please remove your recyclables from plastic bags before recycling the materials and reuse the bags or recycle them properly—plastic bags left at the drop-off center or mixed with other materials are not recycled.

Next time you see a plastic bag waving in the wind or clogging a storm drain, be a part of the bigger solution to eliminate this plastic pollution by committing to bring your own reusable bags, refusing unnecessary bags and encouraging your friends and family to do the same.

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