



# How to Quit **PLASTICS** Guide

eco-cycle®






**We're in the midst of a  
global waste crisis...**







**We've built a LINEAR ECONOMY in which we crank out single-use items made from fossil fuels that took millions of years to create, use them for a few minutes, and then bury or burn them.**

To continually repeat this process rather than reducing waste in the first place, and recycling the products we've already used, is unproductive and wasteful.

The ever-increasing production of plastics is creating serious problems for our health, climate, land, water, and wildlife. Recycling alone isn't the answer . . . we **MUST** reduce.





## Did you know?

**In Colorado, we bury more than 500,000 tons of recyclable materials worth more than \$256,000,000 in our landfills every year.**

Single-use items, and our linear economy in general, are a huge problem, not just plastics.

**However, plastic is in a problem category of its own for a few reasons:**

- 1 It's unjust.** Petrochemical production and plastic pollution disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color. According to a 2024 report from the Environmental Integrity Project, in the US, two-thirds of the people living within three miles of the factories that manufacture the main ingredients in plastic products are people of color. At the end of its life cycle, much of the plastic waste generated in high-income countries ends up in low-income countries not equipped to handle it.
- 2 It never goes away.** Only 9% of the plastic ever made has been recycled. One hundred percent of what didn't get recovered still exists in our environment somewhere. Plastic never fully biodegrades; it just breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces of plastic called microplastics. Scientists have found microplastics everywhere—in our rivers, our drinking water, the soil that grows our food, and our bodies. They've even found microplastics in arctic snow, where plastic has never been, meaning microplastics have infiltrated the global water cycle.
- 3 It's made from fossil fuels like fracked gas, crude oil, and coal.** If you're concerned about fracking and fossil fuel dependency, you care about plastics, too. The petrochemical industry (those who make oil, gas, and plastics) have intentionally ramped up single-use plastics production in response to consumers moving away from fossil fuels for energy and transportation.

## Recycling alone cannot get us out of this mess.

As a mission-based nonprofit recycler, Eco-Cycle will be the first to tell you recycling is not the answer to the problem with plastics. We do believe in recycling plastics, and we want you to continue recycling your plastic bottles, tubs, jugs, jars, etc. But recycling will never be able to keep pace with the exponentially increasing rate at which the plastics industry is producing these items.

### Here's why:

**A huge percentage of plastics just aren't recyclable.** Think candy wrappers, plastic-coated coffee cups, straws, and plastic utensils. There are no markets for these materials, meaning there is no buyer that will turn them into anything new. Then add to the challenge the fact that plastics are made from a large variety of plastic polymers combined with chemical additives that make different types of plastics incompatible with each other.

**Even when some of these plastic items could be recycled back into the same product, "bottle to bottle" style, the plastics industry opts for virgin plastics over post-consumer recycled material because government subsidies keep the price of oil and gas production artificially low.** So even if you're recycling your #1 PETE soda bottle, odds are it's getting turned into something like carpet or clothing, rather than a new bottle. That carpet or clothing is still headed to the landfill after its life is over, and the production of plastic bottles isn't slowed. Plastic manufacturers crank out all kinds of plastic without considering whether it's recyclable or where it ends up. As recyclers, it isn't our job to create some niche market just to briefly save it from the landfill.

**Plastic producers don't design their products with the full life cycle in mind, and they don't buy back their own material like every other industry does.**

The aluminum industry buys back aluminum, the glass industry buys back glass, etc. Why is the plastic industry exempt from creating recycling markets for its own materials?

**When your bathtub is overflowing, you don't start bailing out the water, you turn off the tap! We need to turn off the tap on plastic production.**



**Just because plastics recycling isn't all it's cracked up to be, don't think that recycling as a system is broken. Recycling works and is a critical piece of a more circular, sustainable future—it saves energy, emissions, water, resources, and money.**



Recycling aluminum, for example, saves 95% of the energy it would take to create from virgin materials. Most plastics, on the other hand, were never designed for recycling.

### **Individual vs. Systemic Action**

Your actions make a difference. There are 8.1 billion people in the world. If we all use a single-use, disposable coffee cup every day, that is a huge amount of waste created from a bunch of individual decisions. We each make decisions throughout our lifetimes that can either result in waste, or can save a whole lot of resources!

**Your Zero Waste choices not only decrease the amount of waste you generate, but also send a market signal to the packaging industry.** Waste-conscious consumers are leading a revolution to create a new norm, and the packaging industry is responding.

**That said, it's unfair to place the blame for the global plastics problem—or the responsibility for fixing it—on individuals.** In our linear production system that goes one way, from the natural environment to the dump, we have to work hard to not participate in single-use culture. Even the people most dedicated to Zero Waste can't truly be Zero Waste, and many people don't have the time or resources to adopt Zero Waste practices. We need to pass legislation to support circular economy infrastructure and hold manufacturers accountable for the materials they produce. We need to change systems around us, but also educate ourselves and our communities on how to exist within those new systems.

# Your Step-By-Step HOME WASTE AUDIT

**The first step in tackling any challenge is to examine the problem!**

To start reducing your waste, let's take a look at what you're purchasing, using, and throwing away. We've created Waste Audit worksheets below that will make it easy.

## Step 1



### **Collect your discards.**

To conduct a personal or family waste audit, first collect your trash and recycling over a week or two of normal consumptive habits. Start in the kitchen, then move on to the bathroom, followed by any other bins in the house.

## Step 2

### **Sort through materials!**

Choose whether to begin with trash or recycling, and then go through the batch, item by item. Use the audit sheets on the following pages to record the most common items you find, noting whether they're plastic and if alternatives exist. Our list of plastic alternatives on page 11 can help you find suitable options!



## Step 3



### **Make your goals and begin your phase-out.**

Choose plastic items from your audit sheets that are easy for you to eliminate or replace with an alternative. We suggest focusing on one item at a time, and going at your own pace. You can set and track your goals on page 10 of this guide.



[illegible]



[illegible]



# Going Plastic-Free GOALS



List the plastic items you plan to eliminate or find an alternative for, and check the appropriate box when you've achieved your goal!

Item

\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

Item

\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

Item

\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

Item

\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

Item

\_\_\_\_\_ ☐ Eliminated **OR** ☐ Replaced with: \_\_\_\_\_

# Common Plastic Items and Their SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVES

## BATHROOM



ITEM	ALTERNATIVES
Floss	Look for compostable floss over plastic
Soap bottles	Refill bottles if you have a bulk option, or look for soap bars
Shampoo bottles	Refill bottles if you have a bulk option, or look for shampoo bars
Plastic razor	Metal safety razor with removable blades
Toothpaste tubes	Look for toothpaste tablets, tooth powder
Toothbrush	Look for a bamboo toothbrush, and refuse plastic brushes at your dentist visits
Cosmetic containers	Look for plastic-free options at Zero Waste stores
Feminine products	Silicone menstrual cups, organic cotton tampons, reusable cloth pads

## KITCHEN/GROCERIES

ITEM	ALTERNATIVES
Water bottle	BYO when you go out! Buy a charcoal water filter!
Granola bar wrapper	Make your own bars
Oatmeal canister	Buy oatmeal in bulk. and bring your own container
Pasta/cereal boxes	Buy dry goods in bulk. and bring your own container
Nut butter/jelly/applesauce jar	Look for glass over plastic jars, or make your own
Chip bags	Look for snacks you can buy in bulk or make your own
Beverage cans/bottles	Bring a growler to buy your kombucha/beer
Shopping bags	Invest in a reusable bag or bring an old plastic bag
Produce bags	Bring a mesh bag or reuse a plastic produce bag
Plastic milk/juice jugs	Look for cartons over plastic, make your own nut milk/juice, or look for bottle take-back programs
Produce clamshells	Put bundled greens right into your shopping cart/bag or bring your reusable produce bag for loose greens
Tea bags/coffee pods	Buy coffee and tea in bulk, then use a reusable tea steeper, French press, or pour-over coffee maker
Zip-top bags/cling wrap	Beeswax wraps, reusable cloth sandwich bags



## TAKE-OUT



ITEM	ALTERNATIVES
Receipts	Refuse receipts whenever it's an option, and try to plan one big shopping trip instead of many frequent ones
Plastic cutlery	Bring your own silverware from home, or get a reusable travel set
Paper napkins	Refuse when dining out, or bring your own
Take-out container	BYO container! Order "for here," then transfer the food into your container
Straws	Refuse straws if you don't need them, or bring your own straw

# Build your own ZERO WASTE KIT

**Many wasteful plastic items come into our lives when we are out and about, and it's hard to avoid them if we're not prepared with reusable alternatives.** Make a kit stocked with reusable options and show disposables who's boss! We recommend including the items below in your Zero Waste on-the-go kit:



## REUSABLE TOTES

Keep one in your purse, backpack, car, or bike so you always have one on hand.



## REUSABLE, NON-PLASTIC BEVERAGE CONTAINERS

Look for stainless steel travel mugs and glass or stainless steel water bottles. Mason jars are also a great option, and can often be found secondhand!

## FOOD CONTAINERS

Bring stainless steel or glass food containers for take-out or leftovers when dining out. Mason jars are also a great option!



## COTTON PRODUCE BAGS

Make your own using old pillow cases, clothes, or scrap fabric. Can't sew? Check your local grocery or Zero Waste store (we especially like sets with the tare weight marked).

## REUSABLE STRAWS

Take your pick from bamboo, steel, glass, silicone, and beyond (and don't forget a straw-cleaning brush!)



## REUSABLE UTENSILS

There are many non-plastic travel utensil sets available, or you can make your own with metal silverware wrapped in a cloth napkin. Keep a few in your kit to share!

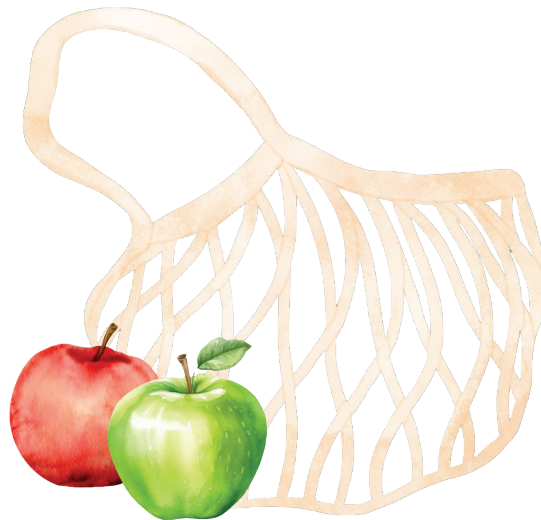


## KEEP YOUR ZERO WASTE KIT HANDY!

**Place your on-the-go kit where you'll use it most!** Do you get coffee mid-morning with coworkers? Keep your travel coffee mug at the office! Do you bike to the grocery store? Store your shopping bags in your bike basket! Keeping your reusable supplies conveniently located will help you avoid single-use plastic bags, cups, bottles, straws, and utensils.



# ZERO WASTE SHOPPING



**When starting out with Zero Waste shopping, the first step is to find reusable containers and bags.** To avoid buying new, you can save the jars and containers that you already buy food in, such as a spaghetti sauce jar. Containers can often be found secondhand as well! Thrift stores tend to carry enormous inventories of large jars, ceramic containers, growlers, and more at very low price points, making bulk containers a great opportunity to support the reuse economy.

**The second step is finding a bulk section.** Find out if there are Zero Waste stores in your area that may offer many types of product refill services, and look out for traditional grocery stores that may have good bulk sections.

**Lastly, prioritize package-free produce!** As a rule, always try to buy produce "naked" rather than shrink-wrapped or in a plastic container. For example, you can buy leafy greens in a bunch from the produce section and put that right into your reusable bag, rather than purchase greens sold in a plastic clamshell.



## A Note About Health Codes

Generally, bringing your own container to most supermarkets and scooping items into it is against health codes. However, using a reusable container with a gravity-fed filling mechanism is acceptable! Products like liquids, nut butters, oils that come out of a tap, coffee that comes out of a grinder, or bulk foods that come out of a gravity-fed container can be poured directly into a reusable container. Most refill-specific stores are small enough that the staff work to keep containers and scoops clean, and the infrastructure is set up to keep everything sanitized between refills.



# Be kind to yourself

**A lot of us who care deeply about this issue tend to be extremely hard on ourselves when it comes to waste. But even the people who excel at Zero Waste can't fully achieve it. That's why creating systems change is the ultimate solution.**

**Additionally, some of us need certain items, such as medicines shipped in expanded polystyrene coolers, or plastic straws. If an item is essential to your health, safety, or well-being, don't feel bad about needing to use it!**

**Do your best with what's available to you, knowing that we are all working within a flawed system and need systemic solutions.**

**eco·cycle<sup>®</sup>**

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