

Good, Better, Best — Eliminating Plastic Waste

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This is the second in a series of articles about reducing the amount of the most common materials among household waste.

The top three materials filling American garbage bins are paper, food waste, and plastic. Of the three, plastic may be the most problematic. Not only does its production use nonrenewable natural resources and energy, but unlike paper and food waste, it is neither biodegradable nor easily recyclable. Nonexistent a century ago, plastic now makes up about 13 percent of the waste stream.

It may be possible to return to a plastic-free lifestyle, but plastic is so ubiquitous today that even the most dedicated environmentalist will have to eliminate plastic incrementally. Here are some good, better, and best steps you can take to reduce plastic waste.

Plastic Waste

In 2017, the most recent year for which EPA data is available, [35.4 million tons](#) of plastic waste was generated. Plastic waste has grown from 8.2 percent of the waste generated in 1990 to 13.2 percent in 2017. Most plastic waste comes from durable goods, containers, and packaging.

Besides the plastic that is captured in the waste stream, 8 million tons of plastic wash into the [oceans](#), and 22 million pounds end up in the Great Lakes [every year](#). It is [predicted](#) that if we continue to recycle less than 10 percent of our plastic, by midcentury, the oceans will contain more plastic than fish.

Even though plastic does not biodegrade like natural materials, it does break down. When it does, plastic may [release toxic chemicals](#). The resulting small particles of plastic are [microplastics](#), which are harmful to animals and bioaccumulate, potentially creating a health hazard for humans.

Good

Usually, the simplest step to reduce any waste material is to recycle, although plastic recycling is less simple than other materials. In fact, there is [a crisis](#) in plastics recycling, in part due to [China's ban](#) on contaminated recycling imports.

But some communities still accept some plastics in the curbside recycling bins. If yours is one of them, recycling is a good place to start reducing plastic waste. Avoid [wishful recycling](#) by familiarizing yourself with your community's recycling guidelines and following them scrupulously.

Because plastics recycling is still so limited, start by reducing your plastic use in the

first place, beginning with [simple changes](#) in your shopping. Eliminate single-use plastics: switch to reusable [grocery bags](#), [water bottles](#), and [utensils](#). Before buying household items, such as [storage bins](#) and measuring cups, made from plastic, look for durable alternatives. Once you've accomplished these steps, you will be ready to do even better.

Better

Even if you can recycle some plastics curbside, download the [iRecycle app](#) or search the Earth911 [recycling database](#) on your computer to find a recycler near you that accepts a wider range of plastics. Set up an area in your home or garage to collect recyclable plastics until there is enough to make a trip to the recycler.

As plastic items in your home wear out, gradually replace them with ones made from more sustainable materials. Prowl thrift stores and vintage shops for the sorts of materials people used before plastic, and visit websites (like this one) for information on new products that support a plastic-free lifestyle.

Choose one use of plastic at a time to systematically eliminate: [plastic wrap](#) and other [food storage](#) containers; [straws](#), [toys](#), and [shaving supplies](#). Start paying attention to product packaging, which is one of the biggest sources of plastic. Start to experiment with [homemade cleaners](#) to avoid all those plastic bottles and tubs.

Best

Changes to your shopping habits that began with bringing your own bags will have grown to include buying bulk products in your own reusable containers.

But to avoid plastic packaging completely, most people will need to avoid traditional grocery stores. They may even have to make significant changes to their diet, eliminating most prepared and packaged foods in exchange for home cooking ingredients bought in bulk at co-ops or farmers' markets.

Once your everyday habits are in place, make plans to avoid plastic during less ordinary experiences, like when you [fly](#) or [host a party](#).

It might be impossible to go 100 percent plastic-free in the world today. Plastic shows up in all kinds of places — like [ballpoint pens](#) and [water filters](#) — that are easy to overlook. Some items don't have plastic-free alternatives, and you might have to make hard choices about making exceptions or doing without. When that happens, find [inspiration and guidance](#) from people who've already made major changes to achieve a sustainable, plastic-free life.

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