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Getting Rid of Plastic Zip-Top Bags



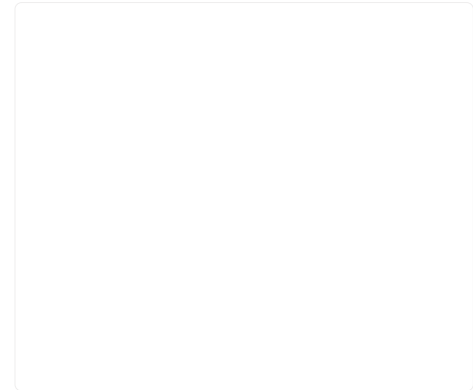
By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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In the quest for a plastic-free lifestyle, zip-top bags are among the hardest things to eliminate. They are so ubiquitous today that it's hard to imagine any other way to offer Cheerios to a toddler on the go, keep a sack lunch sandwich from falling apart, or store small nonfood items from batteries to the hooks and screws for unfinished household projects. What are the alternatives?

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Ziplock Bags

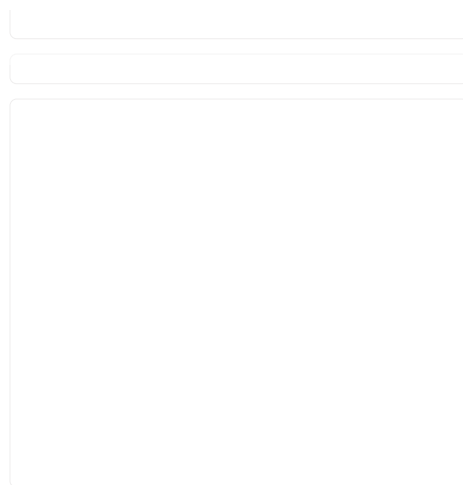
For some people, the answer is not a different product, but simply making the bags they do use last longer. Although intended to be disposable, zip-top plastic bags are also meant to be sturdy. Especially if you buy [freezer bags](#), which are made from thicker plastic than sandwich bags, they can be washed and reused many times before the seams begin to give out. But if you put them in the dishwasher, they fly around. And handwashing and [drying](#) plastic bags is a time-consuming and fiddly business. It can be hard to get them clean – crumbs will collect in the corners – without turning the bag completely inside out, which is awkward and risks tearing the bag. And eventually, the bags will find their way to the landfill or even the [ocean](#).


Silicone Bags

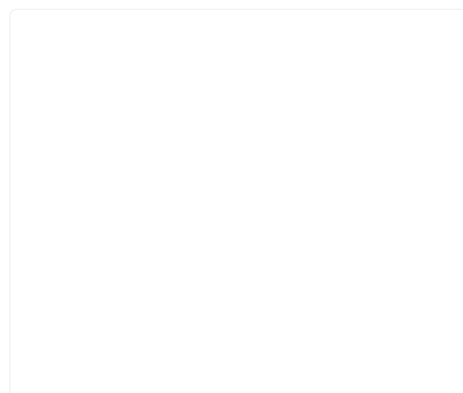
Designed for reuse, [silicone bags](#) are essentially plastic-free versions of zip-top bags. They are sturdier than plastic and come in just as many shapes and sizes. They are dishwasher-safe, but since the zip-top is still hard to turn inside out, most small-sized bags won't be much easier to wash than plastic bags. Also like plastic, there is a [process for recycling silicone](#), but recyclers are unlikely to accept the small silicone items you use at home.

Hard Containers

There are myriad options for hard containers to keep food safe and sundries in one place. The Tupperware-style containers in which lunchmeat is sold are free and perfectly sized for sandwiches. But they may leak and since they aren't recyclable, will eventually end up in the trash. Plastic containers purchased specifically for home food storage will last longer and come in many shapes and sizes. Some, like [LOCK & LOCK](#), are dishwasher and microwave safe and maintain airtight seals even after freezing. If you want to avoid all kinds of plastic, newer [glass containers](#) are available with locking lids to avoid spills, but they are a lot heavier for transporting snacks and lunches.



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Waxed fabrics are an old solution that is becoming popular again.

Paper Bags

Paper bags offer the lightweight portability of baggies. If they are not waxed, they can be recycled after containing dry foods or composted when they are food-soiled. But [unwaxed paper](#) will not prevent grease or leaks. [Waxed paper](#) is more effective for storing lunches mess-free. It is not recyclable, but it is biodegradable, so your municipal composting program may accept it. You can buy [waxed paper baggies](#) sized perfectly for sandwiches or pastries, but for other food items, you can use cut-to-fit rolls. Look for unbleached paper made from recycled material. Although paper is a renewable resource, paper for food storage is still a single-use product.

Waxed Fabrics

With the portability of baggies and the reusability of containers, waxed fabrics are an old solution that is becoming popular again. Reusable wraps like [Abeego](#) and [Etee](#) use beeswax and tree resins to achieve the clinginess of plastic wrap and make the cotton fabric waterproof. [Bees Wrap](#) comes in a variety of cute, seasonal prints. Polyester baggies, like [Bumkins](#) close with zippers and claim to be machine washable and dishwasher-safe. However, that convenience comes with the tradeoff of thermoplastic polyurethane rather than natural waxes to provide waterproofing. You can also find numerous tutorials online to make your own custom-sized waxed cotton wraps with Velcro closures. As long as you use untreated cotton fabric and natural wax, your DIY food [furoshiki](#) will be biodegradable. But none of these options is leak-proof.

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The Best Solution

So many of the advances made in the 20th century were about versatility. There is no single product that can replace all of those wasteful sandwich baggies. It takes a combination of products to fulfill the different uses of zip-top plastic bags and eliminate their use completely. But for each of the things those bags can do, there is a more sustainable option. Instead of looking for a magic bullet, start with whatever you use the most bags for, and try to find a replacement for that. Once you've done that, move on to the storage function for which you still reach for zip-top bags. One use at a time, you can cut plastic out of your kitchen.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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