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Making Halloween Waste Less Scary



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

OCT 17, 2022 [avoid waste](#), [Halloween](#)



It's fun to dress up as monsters and ghosts and pretend to be scared in a fake haunted house. But when you think about all the garbage we generate with our one-and-done costumes and bags of individually wrapped candies ... it's scary.

Every Halloween, some [7 million costumes](#) are thrown away, their synthetic fibers accounting for the equivalent of 83 million plastic bottles. We buy 300,000 tons of candy and 90 million pounds of chocolate just [during Halloween week](#). No one seems to even know how much plastic is used to make all the skulls, cauldrons, and gravestones that decorate front yards each October. But you can reduce the environmental impact of your Halloween.

Trick or Treat

Refusing to pass out treats is the quickest way to get yourself labeled the Halloween version of a Grinch – or worse, get “tricked” – but there are some healthier treat options and candies that don't use [unsustainable palm oil](#) to help you sidestep the [candy quandary](#). Unless you want to risk little ghouls' ire by offering fresh fruit, any food treats will require some kind of wrapping. You can sidestep that by offering [inedible goodies](#) like coins, pencils, stickers, or even polished rocks.

What Do You Think?

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Completely avoiding individually wrapped, fun-sized candies in October is pretty hard, so you're going to have to deal with some candy wrappers. Candy wrappers (not even the paper ones – they're often plastic-coated) can't go in the recycle bin. But you don't have to throw away all those little plastic wrappers. [Rubicon](#) and [TerraCycle](#) both collect candy wrappers through a mail-in program using prepaid boxes or [pouches](#).

If you have kids who are collecting candy, don't forget their trick-or-treat containers. Instead of a plastic bag, go for something reusable. You might get creative and make the container part of the costume (think of Dorothy's basket carrying candy instead of Toto or Bob the Builder with a tool case). A pillowcase is a perfect candy container in a pinch. Even if your kid cajoles you into buying a plastic jack-o-lantern bucket, don't throw it away on November 1 – your child can use the same one for years. And if you're worried about your kids wandering around in the dark, give them a flashlight instead of [glow sticks](#).

Costumes

Worn once and then thrown away, [Halloween costumes](#) are the ultimate case of [fast fashion](#). There aren't any statistics on costume waste in the U.S., but in the much smaller U.K. (where Halloween tends to be a little more low-key anyway) disposable Halloween clothing generates [2,000 tons of plastic waste](#) each year. But costumes don't have to involve so much plastic or be quite so wasteful. Avoid disposable props like fake teeth and synthetic wigs.

You can wear home-sewn costumes for years. Even if your little Muppet outgrows a costume before next year, there's a less crafty parent out there who would love to buy your Elmo. (And if you don't sew it never hurts to check Etsy and Craig's list.) But you don't have to be skillful to make your own costumes.

Be a classic ghost in an old sheet. (Then cut up the sheet for cleaning rags to replace [paper towels](#)). Source unique costumes from your closet and the [thrift store](#). Many items that work in your costume might be entirely wearable when recombined in a different context with clothes from your wardrobe (and vice versa). A long sleeve black T-shirt can be tied into a [ninja mask](#). Those vintage bell bottoms are *au courant* when paired with a contemporary top. A pirate's white shirt converts to office attire with a pencil skirt instead of black jeans.

Cheap Halloween makeup is more likely to contain [red list](#) chemicals like [lead](#) and [cadmium](#), while glittery makeup contains [mica](#), which is safe for wearers but not the workers who mine it. If the [sustainable makeup](#) brands you usually buy don't have what you need, look for [nontoxic face painting kits](#).

Decorations

There's a strong argument to be made that "plastic décor" is an oxymoron. And [plastic](#) is definitely a sustainability nightmare. Try to avoid plastic decorations, including those polyester spider webs that [pose a hazard](#) to birds and small animals. For durable decorations, [the thrift store](#) is once again your Halloween friend where you can find [elegant items](#) to make spooky or [vintage kitsch](#). Check Instagram and Pinterest for inspiration for repurposing and upcycling your finds. The best [upcycling ideas](#), like converting old [Christmas ornaments](#) for Halloween, are durable enough to use for years. But even the most fragile upcycled decorations avoid the purchase of new plastic.

You can also take the natural approach and decorate with biodegradable items like [pumpkins](#), hay bales, and corn stalks. Just make sure you compost those items after the holiday. Around [1.3 billion rotting pumpkins](#) heading to the landfill

might be the scariest thing you imagine this Halloween.

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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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