



- [How to Recycle](#)
- [Where to Recycle](#)

Home & Garden   How & Buy   Inspire & Motivate  
 Living & Well-Being

**Listen to this Article**  
 Instaread

Recycle laptops, phones and tablets for free and plant 20 trees  
**START NOW**

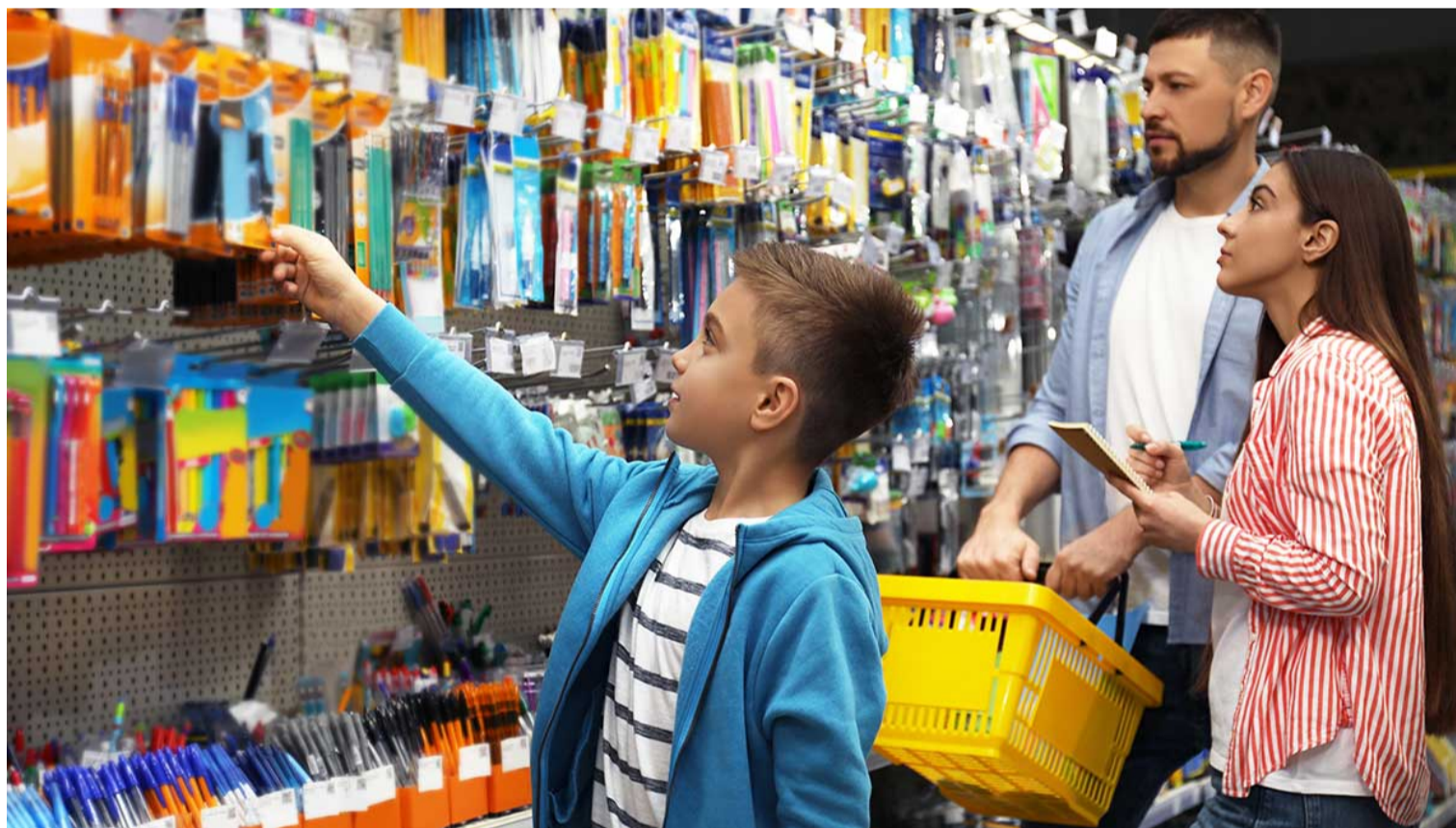
Reading time: 3 mins

# How to Green Back-to-School Shopping



By **Gemma Alexander**

© AUG 21, 2023   [back-to-school-guide](#), [conscious shopping](#), [eco-actions-kids](#)



These days, back-to-school shopping starts in May. And those school supplies lists the school sends out seem to be getting longer every year. But if you step back from the shopping frenzy, a few mindful changes can make the return to school a little less burdensome on both your wallet and the planet.

It's easy to get carried away in the school supplies aisle. School supplies can be expensive, especially if you have more than one school-aged child. It's not exactly environmentally friendly. But unless your child's teacher has specifically requested it, you probably don't need to buy crayons, colored pencils, markers, and highlighters for your first grader. Your fifth grader probably doesn't need a spiral notebook for each subject and a giant binder to hold them all.

If something seems unnecessary, skip it. And if it turns out to be important later, buy it then. The big back-to-school displays may be gone by September, but office supplies are available year-round.

## How to Shop for Lower Impact

Part of the excitement of going back to school is getting new things. Whatever you have to buy, keep a few principles in mind.

Even if something is on the list and you're sure your child will use it, you might not need to buy it. You could pick up a box of brand new #2 pencils at the store. But there's a good chance that you have a dozen barely used ones at home that you purchased last year.

You can also scavenge lightly used backpacks and pencil cases from older siblings or trade items among neighbors. The money you save can go towards buying higher quality, longer-lasting versions of the things you must purchase. Or you can put the savings towards the name-brand sneakers or whatever other must-have item "everyone else is getting."

Choose reusable over disposable and second-hand or recycled over new and virgin materials. You can find [pencils](#), [notebooks](#), and [notepads](#) made from recycled materials; raise the bar on paper products by buying [Fair Trade](#).

Many school supplies are still made with [polyvinyl chloride](#), which is not widely recycled. Look for PVC-free [binders](#), [pencil boxes](#), and organizers.

Crayons and colored pencils generate less waste – and [fewer fumes](#) – than markers. The [Ultimate Green Store](#) sells reusable, recyclable, and nontoxic school supplies ranging from nontoxic glue and recycled pens to upcycled backpacks.

## School Clothes

Back to school is a better time than Christmas to stock up on underwear and socks. And kids might need new shoes after a summer in sandals. But unless a summer growth spurt has made their whole closet obsolete, [avoid buying](#) an entirely new wardrobe. Instead, stick with a new outfit for the first day of school, and wait a few weeks to see what they need. [Clothing swaps](#) can be fun at any age and make sense for kids either before school starts or a few weeks later when styles have "matured."

Tastes and trends change quickly, especially if friend groups shift in the new school year. And it's never too soon to [introduce kids to](#) sustainable fashion. When new clothes are needed, vintage or thrifted finds and [upcycled](#) hand-me-downs are environmentally responsible outlets for self-expression.

## Backpacks

Especially if your school has uniforms, the annual [backpack](#) replacement is a significant opportunity for kids' self-expression. But many branded character backpacks are cheaply made and hard to recycle. Plus, the kid who loves Barbie in September may be begging for something less cringey by Christmas. Instead, opt for a sturdy backpack that will last several years. Many come with multi-year warranties and can be [repaired](#) if a strap or zipper breaks. Some companies, like [Patagonia](#), are making a change towards sustainable textiles. Look for backpacks made from natural fibers like [hemp](#) or linen. If your child is attached



to their favorite character, let them personalize a sturdy bag. Collectible buttons, enamel pins, and cute keychains hanging from zippers can be swapped out as their interests change.

## Less Wasteful Lunch

It's easy to throw packaged foods into a disposable bag and be done with it. But one year of disposable lunch generates [67 pounds of waste](#). Reusable containers are helpful when setting up a [waste-free lunch](#) system. Choose a reusable lunch box instead of paper bags.

There are many cute bento-style boxes and [stainless steel](#) options that eliminate the need for separate containers and [zip-top bags](#). In some regions, juice boxes can be recycled. But reusable water bottles and thermoses are a better bet and a good option for those branded character items you avoided on the backpack.

## Send the Kids Back to School With a Message

While you are back-to-school shopping, talk to your kids about your decisions to reduce their school year impact. There's no reason to insulate them from the environmental impact of their pencils, bags, paper, and other school supplies. They'll learn a few questions to ask themselves and perhaps avoid falling prey to rampant consumerism. At the very least, they may school their teachers and classmates in sustainable living by their example.



[Reading time: 3 mins](#)

### [Earth911 Inspiration: Harmony Between Men and Land](#)



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](#).

#### Related Post

Inspire & Motivate

### Earth911 Inspiration: Harmony Between

Aug 18, 2023 Earth911

How To Recycle

### Recycling Mystery: Smoke Detectors &

Aug 17, 2023 Mary

McDonald

Living & Well-Being

### Where Does Wastewater Go?

Aug 17, 2023 Gemma

Alexander

Earth911 is a universal resource that helps you find your own shade of green.

Join 155,000+ Earthlings

Type your email address

ADVERTISE WITH US

Audience

Products