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Do We Need to Use (and Discard) So Many Plastic Bags Each Year?

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Do We Need to Use (and Discard) So Many Plastic Bags Each Year?

By Meg Scharf

UCF Forum columnist

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Much of the time I hate plastic bags.

Although they *can* be useful, they also can be a messy nuisance and an ecological nightmare.

Plastic bags can keep things dry if you walk through the rain and they do a nice job of carrying groceries home from the store or toting garbage and lawn clippings to the curb.

If not recycled, however, they can become a big mess. After a single use, many end up in a landfill or on the side of the road, blown by the wind into some weeds. They look awful.

Sometimes plastic bags are discarded in a park or public place or on a beach, a blight on our view of nature. Back in the day before plastic bags were common, when grocery stores packed large brown paper bags with food, I do not ever recall seeing discarded brown paper bags at the side of the road. I am not sure why.

I also dislike the sheer wastefulness of using as many plastic bags as we do. For the most part, it seems that they are used once. Sometimes many plastic bags can be used on the same order. Apples are segregated in a bag of their own from bananas or pears. Heavier items might be double-bagged.

It's true: Plastic bags can help when items are cold or moist, such as deli items or meat or freezer items, helping to preserve the food for the trip home, or to contain messes. So there *is* utility to their use in grocery stores.

But why do we use 100 billion plastic shopping bags each year, according to Greenpeace's calculations? An estimated 50 million of those end up in the trash.

They can end up in our lakes, rivers and oceans, and some are actually ingested by fish and marine mammals.

So how do I combat the blight of plastic bags in my own life? I take canvas bags into the grocery and retail stores. They have a great advantage over plastic bags. They are

sturdier and can carry heavier items more easily. Some cashiers don't like them because they say the bagging area is not set up to accommodate them easily.

I tend to carry canvas bags that I have received at conferences, containing the names of vendors and maybe a slogan or two on the sides. But I have seen others carry canvas bags that are far more attractive than conference bags. Showing yourself to be a nerd who attends conferences is not the only option.

I also refuse bags if I have only one or two items. I do not need a plastic bag to carry a bottle of medicine, tube of sunscreen, package of AAA batteries, or a roll of tape from the store to my car. I'd like to think that if many people refused to take one or two plastic bags each week, it may have a small effect on the number that end up in the landfill.

Of course, if you just have to use plastic bags, make sure you reuse and recycle them. They can be used to line waste baskets, pick up after dog walks, or carry your wet towel home from the beach. You can even take plastic bags on a return trip to the store and reuse them to bag your newly purchased items.

Some stores have recycling containers where you can return bags. They can then be recycled and turned into a large plastic bench or some other useful item.

There are a growing number of places that restrict the use of plastic bags. San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, and Austin, Texas, have limits on single-use bags. In Florida, restricting the use of plastic bags is against the law. Florida Title 29, Chapter 403, Section 7033 prevents cities, counties and towns from requiring fees or placing limits on plastic bags.

So I feel it is my responsibility to take these small measures to limit my own use of plastic bags. It makes a very small difference. At least I will not see the bags I don't use on the side of the road, and neither will you.

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