



HOW TO QUIT PLASTICS WORKBOOK

eco-cycle®

INTRODUCTION

We're in the midst of a waste crisis. We've built a linear economy in which we crank out single-use items often made from fossil fuels that took millions of years to create, use them for a few minutes, and then bury them in the ground. For any material, this system of resource use and disposal makes no sense. Each material that we make into everyday products is mined from finite natural resources, decimating our planet's soils, forests, water, and biodiversity. Those products then have to be transported, refined, manufactured and transported again, leaving a huge energy and emissions footprint. To continually repeat this process over and over, rather than recycling the products we already have (generating a much smaller footprint, regardless of the material), is unproductive and harmful. In Colorado, we bury 256 million dollars worth of materials in our own landfills every year, 80-90% of which could have been recovered. Environmentally AND economically, this system we've built defies all common sense.

We're talking about plastics in this workbook, but let's keep in mind that single-use items and our linear economy in GENERAL are a huge problem-- it's not just plastics. "Disposable culture" and infrastructure will not become sustainable just by cutting out plastics.

However, plastic is in a category of its own for several reasons:

1. It never goes away. Only 9% of the plastic ever made is recycled. One hundred percent of what didn't get recovered still exists in our environment somewhere, whether it's in a landfill, in the ocean, in our water, in our soils or even in our bodies. Plastic never biodegrades (at least within centuries), it just breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces of plastic called microplastics. More and more studies are finding microplastics in our rivers, our drinking water, the soil that grows our food, and our bodies. They've even found microplastics in arctic snow, where plastic has never been-- that means that microplastics have infiltrated the global water cycle.



2. It's made from fossil fuels. If you're someone who cares about things like fracking and fossil fuel dependency, you care about plastics, too. Plastics are a product of oil and gas, and if we're only talking about getting away from fossil fuels when it comes to energy and transportation, we're missing a big part of our fossil fuel-reliant society-- plastics. This is not a supply-and-demand problem. Rather, the oil and gas industry and the plastics industry have both intentionally ramped up single-use plastics production in response to consumers moving away from fossil fuels for energy and transportation.



3. Recycling won't get us out of this mess. As a mission-based nonprofit recycler, Eco-Cycle will be the first to tell you that recycling is not the answer to this crisis. We are still recycling plastics in the midst of changing global recycling markets, and we still want you to be recycling your plastic bottles, tubs, jugs, jars, etc. But recycling will never be able to keep pace with the rapidly increasing rate at which the plastics industry is producing these items for a few reasons:



- A huge percentage of plastics just aren't recyclable. Think candy wrappers, plastic-coated coffee cups, and straws. Only 9% of all plastics get recycled, and a big reason for that is that there is so much plastic out there that no one can turn into anything.
- Even when some of these plastic items could be recycled back into the same product they were originally, "bottle to bottle," the plastics industry opts for virgin plastics over post-consumer recycled material because government subsidies keep the price of oil and gas drilling artificially low. So even if you're recycling your #1 PETE soda bottle, odds are it's getting turned into something like a carpet, or pants, rather than a bottle. That carpet is still headed to the landfill after its life as a carpet is over, and the production of plastic bottles isn't slowed. Plastics manufacturers are just cranking out all kinds of plastic without considering whether it's recyclable or where it'll end up at all. As recyclers, it shouldn't be our job to get creative and turn it into something weird just to save it from the landfill for a few years.
- Plastics producers should be designing their products with the lifecycle in mind, and buying back their own material like every other material's industry does.
- When your bathtub is overflowing, you don't start bailing out the water with a spoon, you turn off the tap! We need to turn off the plastic tap.

We need to reduce and reuse before recycling across the board, but just because plastics recycling isn't all it's cracked up to be, don't think that recycling as a system is broken. There have been lots of news stories and messaging recently about the plastics recycling industry, and they often use the blanket statement "Recycling is broken". Recycling is not broken—it saves energy, emissions, water, resources and money, and plastics is only a very small part of the recycling stream. Recycling aluminum, for example, saves 95% of the energy it would take to make it out of virgin materials. But plastics were never designed for recycling, and recycling was never designed for plastics.



INDIVIDUAL VS. SYSTEMIC ACTION

Your actions DO make a difference. There are 7.5 billion people in the world, so if, for example, we all use a single-use coffee cup every single day, that is a huge amount of waste created from a bunch of individual decisions. Your zero waste efforts matter. Every single one of us makes decisions throughout our lifetimes that can either result in waste, OR save a whole lot of resources! Your decisions have an impact and we all have to keep that in mind, because if we all think we're not making a difference as individuals we won't be able to solve anything.

Making an effort to reduce your waste not only decreases the amount of waste you generate, but you're also sending a market signal to the packaging industry. We are trying to change a norm, and you are an early adopter. Waste-conscious consumers are leading a revolution, and the packaging industry hears this new wave of consumerism.

That being said, it's unfair to place the blame for the global plastics problem on individuals. In our linear economy, we have to work hard to not participate in the single-use culture. Even the people most dedicated to Zero Waste can't truly be Zero Waste, and many people don't have the time or resources to adopt Zero Waste practices. We need to pass legislation to support circular economy infrastructure and hold manufacturers accountable for the materials they produce. We need to change systems around us, but also educate ourselves and our communities on how to exist within those new systems—that's why it's still important to talk about individuals' consumption habits.

THE WASTE AUDIT

The first step in tackling any challenge is to step back and examine the actual problem! The best way to start reducing your waste is to simply take a look at what you're using and throwing away.

Step 1

Collect your trash and recycling over a week or so, maybe a little more if you've already been working on reducing your waste. Make sure it's an average week or two so that it's representative of your consumptive habits. Start in the kitchen, then the bathroom, then in any other bin in the house. Each of these categories has its own section in the following worksheets.

Step 2

Sort through it! Pick either trash or recycling, and then go through the batch, item by item. Look at the following pages of the workbook to see how to sort and categorize the items.

Step 3

Use your audit workbook to record the most common items, how much you use it, if it's plastic or not, and if there's an alternative. These are just questions to get your wheels turning so YOU can adjust according to what you'd like to accomplish.

If your goal is to get rid of plastic, pay special attention to the "plastic?" column. If your goal is to get rid of all disposables in general, maybe that column will have less weight. We'll talk about alternatives and the "well-being" category in a moment, so don't worry about them just yet.

Step 4

This is the most stressful step for a lot of people! It can be intimidating and overwhelming to look at your little (or not so little) pile of trash on the floor and try to figure out how you're going to cut down on all these things. So the most important thing to do is to tackle this in bite-sized, approachable pieces.

Pick an item that has an alternative that would be easy for you to swap, or one that you could easily cut out altogether. Even if you find one item that you dispose of more often than the others, don't start with it if it wouldn't be an easy swap. Start with the easy stuff and work your way up from there. For example, if you're seeing a lot of single-use coffee cups but you know you could easily bring your mason jar or reusable mug, start with that one.

Step 5

Now, using our alternatives list look for an alternative for your item. We don't have an alternative for every item, so you may need to research further if no alternatives are provided in this workbook. Cutting something out altogether is also a great alternative.

Step 6

Just focusing on that item, work on phasing it out over a month. If it's easier for you and you can do it over a week, great! Our workbook is set up such that you can set a goal to reduce or replace one item each month. Every month, you record which item you're working on. At the end of the month you revisit that item, see how you're doing and decide if you need to keep working on that one or tackle a new one.

If you're not a workbook kind of person, that's totally okay. We just want to give you a structure and emphasize that the best way to approach this is to do an audit, and then tackle the items one by one so we don't get overwhelmed or discouraged and give up altogether.



COMMON PLASTIC ITEMS AND ALTERNATIVES

BATHROOM



ITEM	ALTERNATIVES
Floss	Look for compostable floss over plastic
Soap Bottles	Refill bottles if you have a bulk option, look for soap bars
Shampoo/conditioner bottles	Refill bottles if you have a bulk option, look for shampoo bars
Plastic razor	Metal safety razor
Toothpaste tubes	Look for toothpaste tablets, tooth powder
Toothbrush	Look for a bamboo toothbrush, refuse plastic brushes at your dentist visits
Cosmetics containers	Look for plastic-free options at Zero Waste stores
Feminine Products	Silicone menstrual cups, organic cotton tampons, reusable cloth pads

KITCHEN/GROCERIES

ITEM	ALTERNATIVES
Water bottle	BYO when you go out! Buy a charcoal water filter!
Granola bar wrappers	Make your own bars!
Oatmeal canister	Buy oatmeal in bulk. BYO container
Pasta/cereal boxes	Buy dry goods in bulk. BYO container
Nut butter/jelly/applesauce jar	Look for glass over plastic or make your own jar
Chip bags	Look for snacks you can buy in bulk or make your own
Beverage cans/bottles	Bring a growler to buy your kombucha/beer
Shopping bags	Invest in a reusable bag or bring an old plastic bag
Produce bags	Bring a mesh bag or reuse a plastic produce bag
Plastic milk/juice jugs	Look for cartons over plastic. make your own nut milk/juice or look for bottle take-back programs
Lettuce/greens clamshell container	Buy your greens naked! Put them right into your container shopping cart/bag or bring your reusable produce bag.
Tea bags/coffee pods	Buy coffee and tea in bulk, use a reusable tea steeper
Zip-top bags/cling wrap	Beeswax wraps, reusable cloth sandwich bags



DAILY LIFE/EATING OUT

ITEM	ALTERNATIVES
Receipts	Refuse receipt if it's an option, plan one big shopping trip instead of many frequent ones
Plastic cutlery	Bring your own silverware from home, or get a reusable travel set (or spork).
Paper napkins	Refuse when dining out. If you need a napkin, BYO—you can even make one out of a bandana, old shirt, etc.
Take-out containers	BYO Container! Order "for here," then put the food from the plate into your own container. Use a specialty food-storage product or just a repurposed jar from home.
Straws	Refuse straws if you don't need one! There are stainless steel, silicone, and bamboo options to buy.

MONTHLY TRACKING SHEET

Find one item to focus on that you would like to eliminate or replace with a plastic-free alternative. At the end of the month, mark whether or not you achieved your goal. If you did, it's time to pick a new item to focus on for the next month.

When you move on to a new item, refer back to your original audit or take another look at your bins to decide what you'd like to prioritize!

JULY

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

AUGUST

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

SEPTEMBER

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

OCTOBER

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

NOVEMBER

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

DECEMBER

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

MONTHLY TRACKING SHEET (CONT.)

JANUARY

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

FEBRUARY

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

MARCH

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

APRIL

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

MAY

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |

JUNE

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grocery Shopping | Item to focus on: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daily Life/Eating Out | What will you replace it with? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household Items/Daily Life | Did you do it? |



BE KIND TO YOURSELF

A lot of us who care deeply about this issue tend to be extremely hard on ourselves when it comes to waste. The fact of the matter is, like we talked about in the introduction, even the people who are the BEST at Zero Waste can't actually achieve it. You can be handed all kinds of plastic that you don't want. None of us are truly Zero Waste in our current society.

Secondly, some of us NEED certain items. Some people need medicines that get shipped in styrofoam coolers. Some people need plastic straws. These are valid reasons to use plastic. If it's essential to your health, safety or well-being, don't feel bad about it!

Sometimes, the alternative is not as easy as the list in this workbook. Nut or oat milk, for example: in some cases, there is a glass, and/or take-back program. However, if neither of those options are available you either have to make your own (and if you work full-time, don't have a blender, are a parent or any other number of reasons this would be pretty hard), or you have to choose between a plastic jug and a carton. In that case, even though both are recyclable, you may want to opt for cartons because they're an example of producer responsibility. Even though a carton isn't plastic free, the carton industry took initiative and responsibility to make that product recyclable, and as locally as possible.

This is just an example to show that no material is perfect, so you have to do your best with what's available to you, knowing that we are currently working within a deeply flawed system and have to work on systemic solutions as well.



BUILD YOUR ZERO WASTE KIT

INVEST IN THE BASICS

Start building (and using!) your own Zero Waste on-the-go kit. Many wasteful plastic items come into our lives when we are out and about, and it's hard to avoid them if we're not prepared with reusable alternatives. Make a kit stocked with reusable options and show disposables who's boss! We recommend including the items below in your Zero Waste on-the-go kit, but feel free to pick and choose:

REUSABLE TOTES

Keep one in your purse, backpack, car, or bike so you always have one on hand.



FOOD CONTAINERS

Stainless steel or glass food containers for take-out or leftovers when dining out. Mason jars are also a great option!



REUSABLE STRAWS

Take your pick from bamboo, steel, glass, silicone, and beyond (and don't forget a straw-cleaning brush!)



REUSABLE, NON-PLASTIC BEVERAGE CONTAINERS

Stainless steel coffee mugs/glass or stainless steel water bottles. Mason jars are also a great option, and can often be found secondhand!



COTTON PRODUCE BAGS

Make your own using old pillow cases, clothes, or scrap fabric. Can't sew? Eco-Bags and Etsy are great sources for cloth produce bags (we especially like sets with the tare weight marked).



REUSABLE UTENSILS

There are many non-plastic travel utensil sets available, or you can make your own with metal silverware wrapped in cloth napkins. Keep a few in your kit to share!

KEEP YOUR ZERO WASTE KIT HANDY!

Place your on-the-go kit where you'll use it most. Do you get coffee mid-morning with coworkers? Keep your travel coffee mug at the office! Do you bike to the grocery store? Store your shopping bags in your bike basket! Keeping your reusable supplies conveniently located will help you resist single-use plastic bags, cups, bottles, straws, and utensils.



ZERO WASTE SHOPPING

When starting out on Zero Waste shopping, the first step is to get your containers and reusable bags. There are lots of places to buy Zero Waste containers specifically, like a tall jar with a fancy lid for olive oil. Or a glass sea salt grinder. But you absolutely don't have to do that! You can also save your jars and containers that you buy food in—like a spaghetti sauce jar. Jars and containers can also often be found secondhand! Thrift stores often carry large jars, ceramic containers, growlers and a bunch more for less than a dollar.

The second step is finding a bulk section. Start by googling “Zero Waste store” in your area to find specific refill stores, and pay attention to which traditional grocery stores have good bulk sections.

Lastly, produce! As a rule, always try to buy produce “naked” rather than shrink wrapped or in a plastic container. For example, you can buy kale in a bunch from the produce section and put it right into your bag, rather than purchase kale sold in a plastic clamshell. If you do want to bag produce, bring your own mesh bag or reuse a single-use bag over and over. A lot of people are conscious of using plastic bags for their groceries, but bag their produce in plastic bags without thinking about it. Produce shouldn't be an issue for health codes—you should always be able to bring your own bag for them or skip the bag.

A NOTE ABOUT HEALTH CODES

Generally, bringing your own container to most supermarkets and scooping items into it is against health code. If you bring your tupperware to Whole Foods, they won't let you fill it up at the hot bar, or scoop dry goods into it.

However, gravity-fed is a-okay! That means something like a liquid, nut butter, or an oil that comes out of a tap, coffee that comes out of a grinder, or bulk foods that come out of a gravity-fed container like the vertical ones that make dry goods fall into your container without making contact.

Most refill-specific stores are small enough that the staff can make sure containers are clean and keep the scoopers clean, and the infrastructure is set up specifically to keep everything sanitized between refills.