

ZERO-WASTE SWAPS

Cat Thompson unpacks our single-use culture and asks how we can reduce our dependence on throw-away plastic.

The rise of veganism in the last two years in particular has triggered the explosion of a booming plant-based food market. Vegans are greeted with an almost overwhelming bounty of alternative goods; smoked, infused and spreadable cheeses abound, milks are blended from every grain imaginable and chocolate has moved beyond its humble free-from foundations. While the significance of such progress is undeniable, for those pursuing a zero-waste or lower-waste lifestyle, the volume of heavily-packaged foods poses a problem.

Although recycling rates in the UK continue to improve year on year, single-use plastic still makes up around 70% of landfill waste. Although recyclable packaging can offset manufacturing emissions, it still comes at a cost to the environment. This is one reason why zero-wasters aim to reuse items where possible, and eliminate their use of the most harmful materials.

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Aside from packaging, unsustainably sourced and processed foods can carry wider environmental ramifications such as carbon emissions generated from importation and pesticide use. Some might also question the ethics of products' parent companies.

Aspiring to zero-waste

Emily Stewart-White is among those who often finds herself grappling with the ethical and sustainable pros and cons of vegan alternatives.

She says, "For me, living as an aspiring zero-waste vegan means a lot of standing in the local supermarket, hungry after a long day's work, frozen to the spot because there are so many things to think about. I've walked in and out of the supermarket empty handed more times than I care to admit after a meltdown! My friend described my lifestyle as 'living life on hard mode'."



Refill stores

When not looking for a more instantaneous food fix, Emily is among those turning to the growing legion of refill stores. Since sustainable values are often synonymous with veganism, many zero-waste shops are helping to plug the gaps between ethical and sustainable consumption.

Emma Thomas runs vegan refill store Full Circle in Cambridge whose items extend to fresh vegan products including oat milk, hummus, artisan cheese and locally produced tofu.

She says, "Supermarkets have a lot of power and it's not always super transparent what's going on. We always advocate for seasonal, local and small businesses and reusable, upcycled, plastic-free and vegan products."



products that are now available which is fantastic, but many come in plastic packaging. It's also currently more expensive to be zero-waste. I know I could get fruit, veg and cupboard ingredients much cheaper wrapped in plastic from large supermarkets."

Difficult swaps, she says, include crisps and milk. But the keen cook and eco-advocate makes up in other ways. "The ultimate aim is to be completely zero-waste but that is still a way off. My other goal is to help encourage my family, friends and colleagues to make positive changes to their lifestyle and reduce their impact on the planet.

I cook, bake and share delicious vegan food with them and try to be a good example on my journey to zero-waste."

Practical steps

There are always improvements to be made on the vast zero-waste spectrum, and it is unrealistic to expect any individual to meet them all. That said, there are plenty of areas where small changes can prove stealthy in the war on waste.

This could include weekly trips to farmers' markets for loose fruit and vegetables at competitive prices, and those who love clothes could consider swapping high-street fashion stores for charity shops. Investing in longer-term items such as menstrual cups or reusable coffee cups can also go a long way to reducing your ecological footprint.

In the meantime, there are ways round for zero-wasters who want to have their vegan cake and eat it too. Staff at refill stores like Full Circle regularly ask customers what products they want to see, empowering them to shop mindfully and sidestep the minefields involved in seeking more ethical products.

"One of the misconceptions about zero-waste is that you have to go without lots of foods you love. One of the priorities we had from the outset was finding those tasty treats. We stock vegan candies, marshmallows, chocolate buttons, crisps, drinking chocolate and cookie and brownie mix, which shows this lifestyle isn't as restrictive as some think," says Emma.

Even if it's just one swap at a time, if there's one thing all vegans can attest to, it's that small changes can make a big difference.

Please email editor@vegansociety.com with your plastic-free tips and struggles.

Accessibility

Research has shown a person omitting meat and dairy from their diet can halve their food-related carbon footprint. With that in mind, perhaps there is something to be said for bigger companies seemingly jumping on the proverbial bandwagon.

Supermarkets are no doubt also more accessible for those who don't live near refill shops or are priced out of them. Many zero-waste items come at a higher price compared with their packaged counterparts, although this can vary between stores.

But, as Emma assures, if affordability is an obstacle, just swapping one or two items can still make all the difference. She says, "It's not always practical for everyone. That could be because of location, commitments and financial barriers; we have students who tend to shop at Aldi but still come to us for a few bits. For example, their lentils which can really make a difference. We're quite understanding that perfection isn't possible. It's another pressure we put on ourselves."

Balancing act

Vegan Carla Khouri says her zero-waste journey has been a slow one. She started with the bathroom, ditching bottled toiletry products for bar soap, solid shampoo and eco-friendly deodorant. Carla has since expanded this to cupboard ingredients and cleaning products, which she now buys from a refill store.

However, Carla admits the ease and value afforded by supermarket shopping can, at times, prove all too tempting. She says, "There are so many new delicious-looking vegan

TRY THESE ECO-FRIENDLY SWAPS



Plastic-free soap and shampoo bars
from Faith in Nature (faithinnature.co.uk) or Friendly Soap (friendlysoap.co.uk)

Menstrual cups
from Mooncup (mooncup.co.uk), Ruby Cup (rubycup.com) or TOTM (totm.com)

Reusable period pants
from WUKA (wuka.co.uk)

No-plastic toilet tissue
from Cheeky Panda (cheekypanda.com)

Bamboo toothbrushes
from Ecomad (ecomad.co.uk)

Bamboo razors
from Nukka (thenukka.co)

Plastic-free dental floss and toothpicks
from Humble Co (thehumble.co)

Reusable make-up remover pads
from Stylpro (styltom.co.uk)



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