



HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

Want to make one big change toward better living? Consider going zero waste.

It's no longer a movement just for extreme bloggers and eco-warriors, and you don't have to be perfect to make the effort worthwhile.

BY LAURA WALLIS

It's fair to say 2020 wasn't the greenest year. The pandemic meant that even some of the most eco-conscious among us went disinfecting-wipe and disposable-mask crazy for a while. We cast aside the reusable grocery bags and went back to paper and plastic; we stashed hand sanitizer everywhere and stockpiled enough paper towels to sop up a swimming pool. Although we're still navigating COVID-19, 2021 may be a good time to look ahead and think about protecting the future of the planet. Here's how to approach a zero-waste—or at least a much-less-waste—lifestyle.

What does zero waste mean?

Imagine if your home operated like nature does, where everything you buy or create could be reused, recycled, or returned to its original source, no land-fill required. Author and green-lifestyle pro Bea Johnson popularized the movement with her blog and then her book, *Zero Waste Home*, in 2013. But she started in 2006 when her family downsized from a large house to a small apartment in search of a simpler, less-car-dependent life. "We only moved in with the necessities," Johnson recalls. "After a year, we got our stuff out of storage and found that we never even missed 80 percent of it." This led to a closer look at what they had been wasting. Johnson came up with the 5 Rs that zero-wasters live by: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Rot. The order is important because the most impactful thing comes first—don't accept that plastic fork, or that mailer, to begin with. As for what you do bring home, the other Rs are the answer to "then what?" Since Johnson got started, an entire industry has evolved, with bloggers, authors, bulk-store owners, and more extolling the virtues of living waste-free. Some do it for reasons of health, others for budget, but whatever your "why," experts want you to know that you don't have to eliminate *all* your trash to make a serious difference—just get started.



Is zero waste anti-woman? Some critics decry zero waste as just adding to the "second shift" of labor for women, since it rejects many of the convenience products that helped liberate us from the house. Thanks, in part, to some overzealous bloggers, the movement has developed a reputation for being about baking bread, mixing up toothpaste, and beating clothes against stones all day. "That scares the crap out of full-time working parents!" Johnson says. "I was doing everything homemade when I started, and it's unsustainable." She still bakes her own bread because she likes to, but gradually, she discovered she could save both money and time by buying things she needed (unpacked whenever possible) and, crucially, just living with less stuff. "When you let it simplify your life rather than complicate it, zero waste can become automatic," Johnson says.

Jaroslav Siroky/EyeEm/Getty Images

Before You Shop

Do a trash audit: Take a serious look at what you're throwing away, and tackle the biggest stuff first. "For us, it was mostly paper towels and paper napkins," says Deanna Taylor-Heacock, owner of the Good Bottle Refill Shop in Maplewood, New Jersey, in recalling her pre-zero-waste life. "I'd buy huge things of them to get through the month." For others, it's food scraps or product packaging.

Make a one-in, one-out rule: "I do this for beauty products," says Kathryn Kellogg, founder of goingzerowaste.com. "It's easy to accumulate so many, just to try them. Use them up fully before buying more."

Know where you can buy unpackaged: "[As much as] 15 percent of an item's cost is the packaging," Johnson says. "So you're throwing money away." Find local or online shops for home goods and bulk foods, as well as butcher shops, farmers' markets, CSAs, and bakeries that will let you bring your own containers—or return theirs for reuse.

Limit your outings: Resolve not to run to the store "just for one thing"; it invariably leads to unneeded purchases. For household and personal essentials—from laundry detergent to hair conditioner—Taylor-Heacock suggests keeping a list of needed supplies, then going to fill your containers just once a month. Be strict with yourself.



Bottles: Tek Image/Getty Images; bag: Janine Lamontagne/Getty Images

Prepare for Shopping Days

Have your gear ready. Keep all your reusable shopping supplies in a tote to grab and go. It will likely take a few weeks to create a system that's manageable for you and make it a habit. "People picture me going to the store with a million glass [containers]," Johnson says. "But that's not practical. We bring just four to five jars—for anything wet—and everything else is lightweight cloth bags for things like grains, bread, flour, sugar, and cookies." Once you get home, empty and wash your bags and containers, and toss them right back in your tote so you never go to the store without them.

Focus only on food when grocery shopping. Tackle things like household cleaners, laundry detergent, and other supplies during that separate once-a-month shopping trip; this also helps limit what you have to lug home from the supermarket.

Shop the periphery of the grocery store.

This is where you'll find whole, unpackaged food, Johnson notes: the fresh produce, the meat and fish counters, and the bulk bins.

Look for better choices. Choose sugar in a paper bag rather than plastic; buy corn in its husk rather than pre-shucked and plastic-wrapped.

Find it used. For durable goods—clothing, sports gear, dishes, furniture—think secondhand. Check out thrift stores, neighborhood swap groups, Facebook Marketplace, and other online resale sites where items are constantly on offer. And don't overlook what your family members might have that they aren't using. "My grandma had so much stuff to give me, including a beautiful collection of handkerchiefs," says Kellogg. Buy new only if none of those turn up what you need.



WHERE TO SHOP

A few websites have done the legwork for you. Check out:

→ app.zerowastehome.com
Helps you find places selling in bulk; listings in more than 100 countries

→ litterless.com
Bulk-shopping options in store and online, and compost locations by state

→ zerowastenerd.com
Find sellers of bulk goods and zero-waste lifestyle products around the world

Food Prep & Eating



Compost (the Rot part of the 5 Rs):

"On average, 50 percent of what a home throws away is organic matter that can be composted," Kellogg says, including food scraps, yard trimmings, and many paper products. You can invest in a backyard compost tumbler, look for a smaller bin made for indoor use, or find a service that will collect the scraps. All of these turn waste into something nourishing for the soil.

Be smart when eating out: Bring containers for leftovers instead of

accepting doggy bags. Don't have a silicone or metal straw with you? Skip the straw. Bring your own to-go cup for coffee—or sit down with a real mug!

Store food like your grandmother did:

Use glass instead of plastic in the fridge and pantry; try cloth bags to keep bread fresh.

Drink tap water: Use a filter if your local water doesn't taste good. Like bubbles? Save money with a sparkling-water maker such as SodaStream.

What's in the Jar?

Bea Johnson famously reduced her household trash to what can fit in one jar for the year—a feat that has become a litmus test for zero-wasters everywhere. It turns out, even when the 5 Rs are implemented to the fullest, some bits of trash are unavoidable. They're different for everyone, but for Johnson, they include things like:

- the backing from stamps
- stickers on the occasional fruit or tomato bought at corner store
- contact lenses, plus the seal on the top of the contact-lens solution bottle
- bristles pried from bamboo toothbrushes
- labels on electrical-appliance cords
- small strips of silicone, when the sink needs recaulking



Around the House

Simplify cleaning supplies. You can mix up basic ones: Johnson cleans just about everything with vinegar, water, and castile soap. Or just source versatile products from a refill shop. "I'll do a [blog] post on an all-purpose cleaner, and people will respond to say, 'You know, you can make your own.' And I say, 'Let me stop you right there,'" says Taylor-Heacock. "I'm not making this stuff! I have to get dinner on the table."

Upgrade the bathroom. A lot of the world uses bidets—and a toilet attachment is an inexpensive addition. It's clean and efficient, and you can use washable cloth for drying instead of wasteful paper. Bonus: "When no one could find toilet paper last March, I wasn't worried," says Kellogg.

Replace disposables with reusables. Cloth napkins instead of paper; broom and mop instead of disposable dusting cloths. You don't have to

shell out for specific "zero-waste" products, unless you want to. "I like certain products, like Unpaper Towels, because they serve a great purpose and look good," Taylor-Heacock says. If it helps you make the transition, go for it.

Set yourself up for success. To get new habits to stick, keep reusable cloths or napkins wherever you'd normally keep the paper versions. Use

them until they need laundering, then toss into a bag or hamper close by, and wash with your regular towel load.

Re-home what you don't need. Give away usable items on the Freecycle Network (freecycle.org) or local message boards. Drop off old linens and towels at the animal shelter. Libraries often collect books for sales. Swap outgrown kids' clothes with other parents.

Compost: svetlkd/Getty Images; zero-waste jar courtesy of Bea Johnson