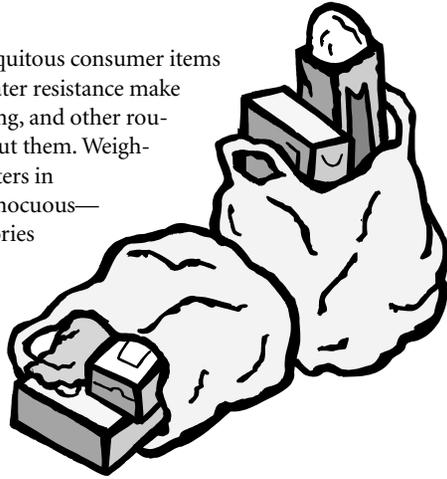


## A Necessary Eyesore?

Plastic shopping bags are among the most ubiquitous consumer items on Earth. Their light weight, low cost, and water resistance make them so convenient for carrying groceries, clothing, and other routine purchases that it's hard to imagine life without them. Weighing just a few grams and averaging a few millimeters in thickness, plastic bags might seem thoroughly innocuous—were it not for the sheer number produced. Factories around the world churned out a whopping 4–5 trillion of them in 2002, ranging from large trash bags to thick shopping totes to flimsy grocery sacks.

Compared with paper bags, producing plastic ones uses less energy and water and generates less air pollution and solid waste. Plastic bags also take up less space in a landfill. But many of these bags never make it to landfills; instead, they go airborne after they are discarded—getting caught in fences, trees, even the throats of birds, and clogging gutters, sewers, and waterways. To avoid these impacts, the best alternative is to carry and re-use your own durable cloth bags.



### DID YOU KNOW...?

- \* Plastic bags start as crude oil, natural gas, or other petrochemical derivatives, which are transformed into chains of hydrogen and carbon molecules known as polymers or polymer resin. After being heated, shaped, and cooled, the plastic is ready to be flattened, sealed, punched, or printed on.
- \* The first plastic “baggies” for bread, sandwiches, fruits, and vegetables were introduced in the United States in 1957. Plastic trash bags started appearing in homes and along curbsides around the world by the late 1960s.
- \* North America and Western Europe account for nearly 80 percent of plastic bag use—though the bags are increasingly common in developing countries as well.
- \* A quarter of the plastic bags used in wealthy nations are now produced in Asia.
- \* Each year, Americans throw away some 100 billion polyethylene plastic bags. (Only 0.6 percent of plastic bags are recycled.)
- \* The Irish have been known to call the ever-present bags their “national flag”; South Africans have dubbed them the “national flower.”

### CHALLENGE YOURSELF AND OTHERS:

Try to go at least one week without accumulating any new plastic bags. If every shopper took just one less bag each month, this could eliminate the waste of hundreds of millions of bags each year.

## SUCCESS STORIES

- ❖ In January 2002, the South African government required manufacturers to make plastic bags more durable and more expensive to discourage their disposal—prompting a 90-percent reduction in use.
- ❖ Ireland instituted a 15¢-per-bag tax in March 2002, which led to a 95-percent reduction in use.
- ❖ In the early 1990s, the Ladakh Women’s Alliance and other citizens groups led a successful campaign to ban plastic bags in that Indian province, where the first of May is now celebrated as “Plastic Ban Day.” Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom also have plans to ban or tax plastic bags.
- ❖ Supermarkets around the world are voluntarily encouraging shoppers to forgo plastic bags—or to bring their own bags—by offering a small per-bag refund or charging extra for plastic.
- ❖ Some manufacturers have introduced biodegradable or compostable plastic bags made from starches, polymers or poly-lactic acid, and no polyethylene—though these remain prohibitively expensive and account for less than 1 percent of the market.



### SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO:

- ✓ Think twice about taking a plastic bag if your purchase is small and easy to carry.
- ✓ Keep canvas bags in your home, office, and car so you always have them available when you go to the supermarket or other stores.
- ✓ Ask your favorite stores to stop providing bags for free, or to offer a discount for not using the bags.
- ✓ Encourage your local politicians to introduce legislation taxing or banning plastic bags.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- 👉 **International Biodegradable Products Initiative** ([www.bpiworld.org](http://www.bpiworld.org)) is an association that promotes the use of biodegradable polymeric materials, including bags.
- 👉 **Grassroots Recycling Network** ([www.grrn.org](http://www.grrn.org)) works to eliminate the waste of natural and human resources—with the goal of achieving zero waste.
- 👉 **Film and Bag Federation** ([www.plasticbag.com](http://www.plasticbag.com)) is an industry group that serves as the “voice” of the plastic film and bag industry.