

Living trends

Let's bin plastic bags

We all know we should be using fewer plastic bags, but how can we reduce the number? And is there a way to make them less harmful to the environment?

Barbara Baker investigates

Every year the average British family gets through at least 300 carrier bags, but how many of us get around to re-using or recycling them? If you put used plastic bags into your household waste they end up in landfill. Not good news, given that in the UK over 17.5 billion plastic bags are handed out at supermarket checkouts each year and it takes at least 100 years for a single one to decompose (or degrade). Worldwide, the problem is even more serious. Australians use 20 million a day, and in China they get through two billion carriers – every day.

The packaging industry tends to argue that environmentalists have got it all wrong. The Industry Council for Packaging (INCPEN) and the Environment, for example, calls plastic carrier bags a 'hidden household hero' and a 'sensible use of resources'. It points out that they make up just a tiny proportion of litter or waste – less than 0.1 per cent of litter and a mere 0.3 per cent of the household waste that goes to landfill. INCPEN also says that it's a myth that plastics use up scarce oil supplies.

But what about other ways in which plastic bags harm the environment? Planet Ark, an international environmental group, suggests plastic bags kill at least 100,000 whales, seals and turtles and a million birds every year worldwide. Marine animals, like leatherback turtles, often mistake the bags for jellyfish and eat them. Birds, mammals and fish get tangled in them or eat them by mistake, causing pain and death from starvation or suffocation. During its annual 'Beachwatch' campaign in 2003, The Marine Conservation Society found 5,831 plastic bags across 244 beaches in the UK. A single whale washed up on the coast of France was found to contain 800kg of plastic bags, including two from UK supermarkets.

So is the answer to impose a prohibitive charge on plastic bags? Here are the main ideas that have been suggested:



WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

MAKE ALL BAGS BIODEGRADABLE

Pros Might reduce litter; good PR for supermarkets; can still re-use until discarded.

Cons There's a difference between 'degradable' and 'biodegradable'. The former breaks down into smaller plastic bits; the latter is ideal as it's compostable. But biodegradable bags are likely to be rejected by supermarkets as not strong enough. Don't mix degradable bags with other types of plastic – it may sabotage the recycling process or reduce the quality of recycled items. Don't put biodegradable bags in with the household rubbish either – the government is trying to reduce the amount of biodegradable material sent to landfill because it releases methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.

INTRODUCE A 'PLASTIC BAG TAX'

Pros This was done in Ireland, where 1.2 billion bags a year were handed out before a 'plastax' was introduced. Now shoppers have to pay the equivalent of 10p per bag and it's thought this has reduced consumption by at least 90 per cent.

Cons Shoppers might get used to paying for the bags anyway. A tax doesn't guarantee people will choose to use environmentally friendly bags instead.

RE-USE BAGS

Pros Around 75 per cent of UK consumers re-use their plastic bags at least once for a variety of purposes from bin liners to lunch bags. This is great, but if we all re-used every bag 12 times instead of asking for a new one each week we'd cut the number used annually by around a third.

Cons None – as long as you remember to recycle them at the end of their life.

RECYCLE BAGS

Pros Most supermarkets now provide recycling facilities for bags; they can be turned into furniture, fleeces, car parts and many other useful items.

Cons None, especially if you use as few as you possibly can. However, some supermarkets still don't offer recycling facilities for plastic bags.

BUY A BAG FOR LIFE

Pros Most will last for years, then you get a free replacement if it wears out.

Cons None. They're a genuinely good idea.

5 WAYS TO CUT DOWN ON CARRIER BAGS

- 1 Use a Bag for Life (see above).
- 2 Always have a few sturdy cardboard boxes handy in the car so if you forget your Bag for Life you can place goods straight into your trolley at the checkout and decant into the boxes. Or look for cardboard boxes in store.
- 3 Make the most of cardboard wine boxes – even if you don't buy any wine, they're great for washing-up bottles, sauces, oils, jars of pickle, etc.
- 4 A cool box is ideal for perishable items in transit – bottles are less likely to break, too.
- 5 Look for natural jute or string bags (try oxfam.org.uk) or, for more recycled bags, visit greenhouseonline.co.uk.