

# Green With Envy: Best option for green shopping not paper or plastic

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Paper or plastic — the eternal question. For Whole Foods, it's only paper from now on. These stores sell organic and natural food, and they are aiming to help the environment even more by banning plastic bags in favor of recycled paper bags. While an admirable move — I won't deny that — it begs the question: Why does it have to be paper or plastic?

Both of these types of bags take energy to create, and their being produced in mass quantities makes for lots of bags being discarded after one use, whether to a recycling bin or a landfill. According to The Wall Street Journal, we go through 100 billion plastic shopping bags each year. That's only as a country — the entire world uses upwards of one trillion.

Although they seem small and harmless, plastic bags spend most of their lives in landfills where they can take hundreds of years to decompose, according to National Geographic, where the by-product can be toxic. Only about 5 percent of plastic bags are recycled, and even then the process of recycling takes energy. Plastic bags also tend to end up as litter, which can be dangerous to wildlife that choke on them.

Paper bags are made of recycled paper at Whole Foods stores, but the process to create them and keep recycling them can take more energy than creating plastic bags, and the paper originally is going to come from cutting down trees. The main problem here is that neither of these solutions is really better than the other — each has its advantages and each its disadvantages, but creating one trillion of any one thing each year is going to make for a lot of energy consumption and a lot of waste, especially when people discard these items into the trash can after one use and use brand new ones when they want to consume again.

As consumers, we need to realize that just because the business only offers us plastic or paper, that doesn't mean those are the only options. Reusable cloth bags are a great way to cut down on the amount of waste you're creating by reusing what you already have instead of routinely disposing of bags after every trip to the store.

This paper or plastic mentality is restrictive because it only feeds what seems to be our obsession with the disposability of goods — more food is individually wrapped, more drinks come in individual bottles; my brother said he went to a deli where the pickle was pre-packaged separately from the rest of the meal. Are people really in such a hurry with our lives that we need to make sure that pickle is wrapped in case it needs to be transported to a different location?

Convenience has taken over our waste habits because once the garbage gets taken from the curb each week, our consciences have been cleared — we start off the week with a clean slate. What if the garbage was only collected every month, and people became more aware of the waste they create? The grocer might ask you paper or plastic, but as the consumer you need to be asking if there is an alternative that creates less waste.

I'm not going to knock Whole Foods for trying something to help the environment, because I always feel like any action, small or

large, is still an effort to help change the affect we have on the environment. But in the bigger scheme of things, we need to reduce the amount of garbage we create by decreasing the amount of “stuff” we think we need. And a great place to start would be questioning how much more “stuff” we need to carry that “stuff” around in.

I’m not calling to ban all kinds of disposable bags, but what I am saying is that consumers need to realize that paper or plastic bags are merely two options that the store provides, but they aren’t the only options out there. We are the ones creating so much waste, and we need to take responsibility to change that.

When plastic bags ornament beaches and wildlife, and trees get the axe for more paper, I consider it our duty to fix that. This involves thinking beyond the paper, the plastic and the other conveniences and focusing less on “how easy is it to throw this away” and more on “how can I avoid having to throw this away.”

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