



GREEN AMERICAN

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Plastic is harming our health, choking the environment. *Can you live without it?* Page 12

Take the Plastic Challenge



The "Bag Monster" dresses in 500 plastic bags—the number used by the average US household per year.

Photo by Tara Crow

We're Curbing our Plastic, and We're Blogging About It!

Disposables vs. Renewables

I recently read that using a Styrofoam cup is environmentally preferable to using reusables, because of the energy it takes to make and repeatedly wash the latter. Is this true?

Ashley Long
Madison, AL

TRACY: Depends who you ask. In 1994, Martin Hocking of the University of Victoria in British Columbia published a study that looked at the energy costs of five different types of cups from fabrication to use. He found that when you figure in the energy used during manufacture and repeated washings, single-use Styrofoam cups win over glass and ceramic cups. It would take 393 uses for a glass to break even with a Styrofoam cup in terms of lifetime energy use, and 1,006 uses for a ceramic mug to do so.

Cringing yet? So was I. But then David Schatzky at GreenResearch.com talked me down. Hocking calculated his figures using 1990s dishwashers, and energy use of today's dishwashers has dropped around 42 percent since then, says Schatzky.

Schatzky reworked Hocking's calculations and found that today, "it may take just a few dozen uses for reusable cups to be more energy efficient than their disposable counterparts." (To read Schatzky's 2009 analysis and his 2011 follow-up, visit GreenResearch.com and search for "reusable vs. disposable cups.")

Then, you have to take

While watching the film *Bag It*, I cracked up at how one activist brilliantly expressed his stance on plastics (which also happens to be Green America's): "We're not saying no to plastic. We're saying no to *stupid* plastic."

Plastics have done a lot of good—without them, the glasses that correct my severe myopia would weigh a ton and probably have broken on my face more times than I could count. I might not have a computer to write on (at least, not one that didn't take up an entire room in my house), and my daughter's asthma inhalers might be a lot more expensive and unwieldy. So I realize it's simply unrealistic to say all plastic has to go.

But I agree that we all have to say goodbye to "stupid plastic": unsustainable amounts of single-use plastic packaging, water bottles from Fiji, and the grocery bags that I see wrapped around tree branches or tumbling across streets and fields everywhere I go.

While working on this issue, I suddenly became much more mindful of the stupid plastic I've allowed into my life, even though I try to be careful about all waste. I bring my own bags to the store and said no to bottled water long ago. But I'm guilty of stacking organic microwave lunches (plastic trays, plastic wrap, plastic-lined box) in my freezer. And I need to be better about avoiding ridiculous packaging.

Throughout November, the Green America editors will be trying to ditch the disposables. Want to join us? We'll be blogging about the joys and challenges of this part of our green-living journeys on "Plastic Monday" on our newly launched blog: blog.GreenAmerica.org. Take the challenge with us, and use the comments section to ask us questions, give us tips, or let us know how you're doing!

—Tracy Fernandez Rysavy, editor-in-chief



TRACY
FERNANDEZ
RYSAVY

She says: "The 'greenish mildew' you refer to is probably mold and algae, but there may be some mold there as well. It can be easily removed with a bristle brush. For heavier jobs, some mild, eco-friendly detergent and water, or an environmentally neutral sodium carbonate product work well (ecogeeks.com).

Most importantly, your home is giving you a warning: there may be moisture building up somewhere. Check the roof, gutters, chimney, and flashing around windows for breaks in the siding to see if water is penetrating the building envelope.

"It would also be a good idea to check mold levels in the home with a mold expert or a "do it yourself" air test kit (examinair.net) to make sure your indoor air quality is not being compromised. This should be done every three years. Visit www.acac.org, to find names of experts who are certified in mold remediation."

a look at the costs Hocking ignored: Styrofoam releases styrene, a suspected neurotoxicant, hormone disruptor, and carcinogen. And all plastics are causing egregious harm to the oceans and littering landscapes worldwide.

While different studies using different methodologies come up with different results on the plastics vs. disposables energy-use question, all of us—and the Earth—are likely safer and healthier sticking to reusables.

Tackling Mildew

What is the most environmentally responsible way to remove greenish mildew from the exterior of my home?

Jonathan Schorsch
Bronx, NY

TRACY: I punted this question to Caroline Blazovsky, the CEO of MyHealthyHome.info, a nationwide healthy home consulting and services company.

Incentives for Solar

I am thinking of investing in solar panels and/or wind energy for my home. Is there a Web site where I can find all the financial incentives available?

Brian Coverdale
E-mail

TRACY: The best site is dsireusa.org, a database of local, state, and federal tax incentives for renewables and efficiency. Don't forget: Our program with Sungevity offers eligible members a \$500 discount, and the company gives another \$500 to Green America (Sungevity.org/green-america).



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