

Plastic Free July: How You Can Reduce Waste to Make a Lasting Impact Q&A July 2023 Webinar

Q: I would like a place to recycle (or rather reuse) plastic medication bottles and glass and plastic supplement bottles, I know they are small but numerous! They should be sterilized and reused. Anyone know of such a service?

A: We don't know of a service like that for health care products. The amount of regulation around doing that would likely be prohibitive. That's why we are focusing on companies like rCup for large events and pushing for policy change at airports and other 'closed loop' institutions where there is a lot of single use and implementation of a reuse program is doable and economically beneficial.

Q: Is there any effort to outlaw balloons? We know many end up in the guts or around the gills of ocean life.

A: Yes, we supported Goleta's new law that included limiting Mylar balloon sales. We are pushing on other local jurisdictions to do the same. Mylar balloons endanger marine wildlife, and on land they can tangle on power lines, creating outages or even starting fires.

Q: Is there any way to reduce medical plastics?

A: Medical plastics are a super small % of total plastic use so there's a bigger impact if we focus on reducing items that are a larger % of use and also easier to replace. These include the plastic bags, bottles, and packaging that make up the bulk of the issue.

Q: For Toad and Co: Has there been a feasibility study about shipping reusable shippers back and forth - seems like you are doubling transportation - using fossil fuels to return the shippers which is a major concern with the new shopping methods of individual shipments via Amazon etc and lack of in-person shopping.

A: Although there are no perfect solutions (except not shopping online!), this is the only solution we have found to eliminate single-use waste without adding to the recycling piles that our country does not have the ability to process with the insane amount of packaging out there. Thinking about the entire life cycle of a piece of cardboard that is used once and then needs to be recycled has a huge carbon impact. Check out this [Life Cycle Assessment](#).

Also, we ship these mailers back via USPS which has a reduced carbon impact than shipping methods such as UPS/Amazon.

Q: It was so great to hear about Toad&Co's sustainable packaging initiatives! I'm curious about the carbon cost of shipping an empty box back. I imagine that's been considered already, but I'd love to

hear more about it!

A: It is a flat vinyl mailer shipped via USPS which has a reduced carbon impact (the post is already going to your location rather than an additional stop like with Amazon or UPS)! No solution is perfect unfortunately, but if you are thinking about the entire process of making the cardboard or paper that usually has a one time use and is just going to be recycled, this also takes a lot of energy, water use, land use and CO2 emissions. Also, recycling plants can not keep up at the rate of shipping in the US so this is a solution to reducing that impact as well.

Check out this link if you are interested in the specifics of [Limeloop!](#)

Q: Once a month our church group prepares next-day lunches for Transition House residents. We use plastic sandwich bags and small single-use water bottles. What is a realistic, economic way we could avoid this plastic usage?

A: If it's affordable you could package food in parchment paper, closed with a biodegradable sticker. Costco sells bulk parchment paper. If reusable water bottles are not feasible, you could try boxed water. This is a lighter footprint alternative to both plastic and aluminum packaging for bottled water.

Q: How and where can we effectively recycle plastic film and plastic bags?

A: There are stores that take them back but it's not clear whether the material they receive is clean enough to send to a recycling facility.

If you are local (Santa Barbara) you can take film plastic to Ablitt's Fine Cleaners. Their Planet Protectors group has a twice weekly [collection program](#) that requires a sign-up to attend. Their plastic goes to Trex where it is turned into home products.

You can also look into Terracycle which is a private company that downcycles into more products although you have to send items to them through the mail.

Q: Since the new plastic laws I noticed a lot of new signage that explained the limiting of single-use waste. Within a week - most restaurants continue sharing single-use items. Why are individual regulations not working for local restaurants?

A: Most laws are not fully enforceable. City officials rely on the public to let them know when businesses are out of compliance. You can email the sustainability department for your city and they will look into it.

Q: Why do grocery stores still have single use plastic bags?

A: We took some steps back during the pandemic but most stores now let you bring your own bags and the state is now cracking down on those thick bags that stores started giving out during the pandemic.

Q: Plastic waste has historically been addressed at the individual level. However it is known now that we need systematic changes and not blame the plastic issue on individuals?

A: It's top down, bottom up for sure! The more pressure we put on companies to change their products, the faster they will take action. Social media is making this easier; companies want a presence on social media to boost their products, giving us an 'in' to make constructive suggestions.

Q: I used a great Refill Shop when I was in college. However these kinds of stores just aren't available in my area (in North Santa Barbara county).

How can stores like these be implemented in low-income//working class areas? I tend to find these shops in more affluent areas.

A: From Sunkissed Pantry: I am constantly trying to adjust my prices to meet demand for all income levels. My prices for my spices and teas are far below grocery store prices. I encourage you to also check out [IV Co-op](#) which caters to students. My goal is to give people options for all income levels.

There are also companies like [Blueland](#), [Etee](#), [Earthling](#) and [Silver Falls Sustainability](#) that offer products by mail. They have regular sales and some (not all) of their products are priced similarly to their plastic packaging counterparts.

You can also buy the powdered/boxed version of products at pretty much any grocery store. Removing the water takes out the plastic and can even be cheaper! Powdered laundry detergent, dishwasher soap and bar soap for the bathroom can all be less expensive and are lighter on the planet.

Q: I use the food pantries in Santa Barbara. They put most fresh produce into plastic bags and close them. So it's a 2-fold problem: often the produce is starting to rot, and the plastic bags. Any chance you can start working with them?

A: We would love to work with them on a solution. In the past we have donated reusable bags left over from events like the Earth Day Festival. Thank you for the recommendation.

Q: Get dry cleaners to change their plastic clothing wrapping. They use tons of plastic.

A: Some dry cleaners (like Ablitt's in Santa Barbara) allow customers to opt out of the plastic

garment sleeves. Others (including Ablitt's) give customers the option to use a bag like "Green Garmento" that is reusable. Ask your dry cleaner if they might adopt either of these policies.

Q: Are there suggestions for quickly composting compostable packaging or plates/bowls? I've tried and it is still in my bin months later.

A: Most compostable containers need an industrial system to create enough heat to compost them effectively. If your local waste management company has that type of system, you can compost with them. Compostable packaging also costs companies more to purchase, a cost they pass on to consumers. Compostable packing is also a 1:1 swap for plastic so it doesn't solve the waste reduction dilemma. Reuse is cheaper over time and eliminates the need to have such a wide variety of waste management solutions.

Q: What about the plastic packing of toilet paper?

A: There are several companies that offer quality toilet paper in paper packaging, including [Plant Paper](#) and [Who Gives a Crap](#). Some grocery stores offer single rolls wrapped in paper. Hopefully you are also shopping for toilet paper made from 100% recycled paper. The super soft kind is made from really old trees!

Q: I live in an apartment block with no garden. How can I compost here in Santa Barbara?

A: There are community gardens that accept food scrap compost. I take mine to Pilgrim Terrace on the West Side near La Cumbre Junior High. The compost needs to be very clean - no twist ties, rubber bands or other bits of packaging.

Q: How can you help me in Uganda to have what you are doing that side, thanks.

A: We hope that some of the other suggestions on this list will be helpful for you. Thank you for tuning in from Uganda!

Q: What about compostable silverware, made of avocado pits or other material, I recall seeing them advertised.

A: It's fine if it can actually be composted. In Santa Barbara County, compostable items that resemble plastic like disposable cutlery and food containers are composted. The system doesn't differentiate between those items and plastic. Compostable tableware can be more expensive than other types and if it's not composted it's going into the landfill. Reusable is the most planet-friendly solution.

Q: Does r.Cup work with competitors to standardize products?

A: Yes! r.Cup participates in PR3's Reuse Standards Panel, which is creating international standards for reuse systems. One of this panel's goals is to ensure that reusable products will include standard elements that allow for quicker scaling operations of reuse solutions. So, for instance, if a city wanted to have a city-wide reuse system, where there's a "reuse bin" behind every house and on every corner, they are requiring standard design elements so that many different reuse providers can operate interchangeably with each other."

So, r.Cup and another company can each have their own branding, but they will have enough in common that any washing provider could wash and handle either product.

Q: How can we learn more about the school materials program?

A: From Explore Ecology: [Visit our website!](#)

Q: I would love to some time share with this venue about my effort here in San Luis Obispo, called Tableware Share. I offer everything needed for events. starting at \$.10/item

A: That is fantastic! Please contact Kathi King, kking@cecmil.org so we can learn from your program.