

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info



Preventing Plastic's Pollution

Dear EcoGirl: Thanks for all you're doing! I'm wondering what can be done with plastic bags and the plastic that wraps food. We've been rinsing, drying, and putting them in plastic grocery bags to recycle. Do you know if this works? I'm hoping it won't end up in a landfill, or worse, the ocean. Thank you so much for looking into this! I think it would be great if everything man-made could be recycled somehow and not dumped out into our precious world. *Signed, Diligent in Freestone*

Dear Diligent: Thank you for your question.

Yes, to protect our planet, it's vital that we avoid plastic garbage in our landfills and environment. Plastic offers us durability, but makes long-lasting trash. It's predicted that plastic bags in modern landfills will take up to 1,000 years to breakdown. Our earth is being cluttered with plastic discards, even in remote and once-pristine places. For instance, in the northern Pacific Ocean, there's a so-called plastic island (more accurately a trash spiral) estimated to be the size of Texas and a mind-boggling 3.5 million tons.

Even when plastic breaks down, it doesn't biodegrade gracefully back into nature. Instead, it "photodegrades," splitting into increasingly-smaller pellets that permanently permeate ecosystems — and absorb toxics (such as PCBs) along the way. Animals mistakenly eat these poison pellets, which fill their bellies, block vital nutrients, compromise their health, and introduce bioaccumulating toxics into the food chain. A researcher in the Pacific trash spiral found six pounds of plastic for every pound of plankton! Scientists estimate that each year at least a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals and sea turtles die from eating or getting entangled in plastic.

A Better Way

The good news is that we can recycle plastic. Plastic bags, for instance, can

be reborn as composite lumber, railroad ties, playground items, clothing, carpeting, and new bags.

- **Film plastics accepted here.** Just this year, North Bay Corp. (which handles all of Sonoma County's recycling) added plastic bags and other film plastics to what they'll accept in the blue recycling can (though not at Recycletown).

What's allowed are *soft film plastics*, such as tortilla and paper towel wrappers, as well as various bags, including grocery, shopping, produce, newspaper, frozen veggie, and dry cleaning bags. Avoid *crunchy film plastics*, such as chip bags, CD wrappers, cereal box liners, and cellophane (like SaranWrap™). Remove strings and handles.

- **Preparing your plastics.** It's vital that film plastic be clean and dry, because its low-temperature melting process doesn't burn off contaminants, risking holes in the final material.

It's also important to gather these items into one bag — to keep them clean, avoid litter during transfers, simplify processing, and prevent infiltration into paper pulp.

Note: You can also drop this film plastic (prepared similarly) at most grocery stores. This is actually preferable, because it'll stay cleaner if not mixed with other materials, and thus be more usable domestically.

- **Getting more info.** For a handy flyer describing the acceptable film plastics, see <http://unicycler.com/pdf/plastic_bags.pdf>. There's also a flyer summarizing the blue can's overall rules, though it has the older plastics info <http://unicycler.com/pdf/sonoma_county_ssr_brochure.pdf>. Find more recycling specifics in the AT&T Yellow Pages (under "R" for Recycling), <www.recyclenow.org>, and the EcoDesk (707) 565-3375.

The Bigger Picture

Of course, to truly decrease our earth impact, we must also "reduce and

reuse" the 380 billion plastic bags that Americans consume each year. For instance, you can:

- **Buy a reusable grocery bag.** Look for a style you like, ideally made of organic cotton or recycled plastic. Each reusable bag can eliminate 1,000 plastic shopping bags over its lifetime.

- **Develop a system for having your bag at the store.** My bags go on my inside front door handle, ready to grab on my way out. You can also get a compact bag that fits in your purse or briefcase.

- **Reuse your plastic bags.** I dry my washed bags with Real Goods' counter bag dryer <www.realgoods.com>. Then they go inside my cloth bag, ready to use at the store. Other bags line my garbage cans and collect compost materials.

- **Give away unneeded plastic shopping bags,** for instance to a thrift store.

- **Complete the loop and buy recycled.** For links to various recycled products, from coasters to jewelry to furniture, see <www.RecycleStore.com>.

I hope that this information supports your earth-honoring ways.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guide to Sonoma, Napa, & Mendocino Counties, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter.

Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. View past columns at <www.AskEcoGirl.info>. Also contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl believes that we can all be a superhero for the planet. Then she shows you how!"

© Copyright Patricia Dines, 2008. All rights reserved.

Published in the West County Gazette, October 2008.