

# Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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## Reaping the Rewards of the Bulk Bin

**Dear EcoGirl:** Do you have any tips for buying food from the bulk aisle? I want to do this more often, but sometimes it just seems easier to grab something packaged. *Signed, Seeking Convenience*

**Dear Seeking:** Thank you for your question, and for bringing up one of my passions, foraging in the bulk bins, which nurtures our health, wallets, and planet.

**Specifically, buying bulk lets you:**

- **Save significantly on food costs**, by cutting out the packaging expenses.
- **Afford more organic items**, because of these lower prices.
- **Reduce the eco-impacts of manufacturing, shipping, and discarding packaging.** Packaging comprises one-third of our country's overall waste!
- **Scoop up only the amounts you need**, and keep them fresh, because you don't have to commit to a whole bag at once.
- **Try small quantities of new things**, to bring more variety into your diet.
- **Use fresher ingredients**, including herbs and spices, for better-tasting meals.
- **Make custom food blends**, such as your own trail mix or rice combinations.
- **Avoid the additives in packaged foods**, and trim calories, fat, and salt.
- **Lower your costs for health and beauty supplies**, including lotions, shampoos, and herbal tinctures.

Sounds great, right? So here's how you can reap these bulk buying rewards.

### Step 1: Getting started

Begin by exploring the bulk aisle of your local health food or grocery store. You'll likely find an enticing array of cereals, beans, rice, pasta, flour, sugar, nuts, raisins, candies, teas, popcorn, oil, honey, syrup, herbs, seaweed, fresh peanut butter, health and beauty supplies, and more.

For a quick start, use the bags and containers they provide to buy the goodies you need and store them at home.

### Step 2: Set up your home storage containers

Your next likely step will be to set up a more organized home storage system. Quality containers can keep food fresher than shelf packaging, be more attractive, and protect better against pests.

**1) Identify your approach to containers.** For instance:

- **Do you prefer to have matching containers** or a more eclectic look?
- **Would you like to coordinate new containers** with styles you already have?
- **How important is price** versus style and quality?
- **Do you want glass or plastic?**

While I have some specialized containers (spice jars, tincture bottles, shampoo bottles), **I mostly use glass canning jars for my food storage because:**

- **They're relatively cheap**, easy to find in various sizes, and stack well together.
- **The tops are standardized in two sizes**, Regular or Wide Mouth, making lid storage easy. (You can make it even simpler by sticking to just one width.)
- **Glass avoids the problems of plastic containers**, and thus keeps chemicals (like BPA) out of my food, trims the eco-costs of petroleum, and is easier to recycle at the end of its lifecycle.

**Tip:** You can also get one-piece hard plastic caps to replace the standard two-piece canning lids; these are especially handy for frequently-used foods. I got mine at Sebastopol Hardware and feel their benefit warrants a little plastic.

**So what if you're considering plastic containers**, say because there are kids

in the house? I think that the benefits of bulk make reusable plastic OK, but the trick is getting healthy plastic. So look for BPA-free options that are hard to the touch (to avoid softener chemicals that I feel get into food, especially liquids).

**2) Buy your containers.** You might start with a few basics (like flour, sugar, rice, and cereal), and add more later. You can find great options at garage sales, discount stores, cooking stores, and online.

**3) Label your containers to avoid confusion.** You can write or computer print product names on sticky labels, or onto paper secured with scotch or packaging tape. For plastic surfaces, you can use a permanent marker. You might also note any cooking tips. For instance, I taped the tablouli recipe on my bulgur wheat jar, so it's always there when I need it!

### Step 3: Set up your bulk carrying containers

To be truly green, buy bulk items in bags or containers that you put in your cloth shopping bag, wash, and reuse.

I hope that this column helps you fill your kitchen with jars of healthy meals to come.... See [www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl4a.html](http://www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl4a.html) for more bulk tips plus information about my new Ask EcoGirl booklet, *Healthier Housecleaning*.

*Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, 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. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.*

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