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Shoppers saving the planet, one reusable bag at a time

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For more and more people, the supermarket checkout line question "Paper or plastic?" simply isn't relevant.

It's no longer a matter of a few tree huggers taking their hemp bags shopping with them to save the world. So many good-looking reusable market bags are available these days, you can buy them and use them as a fashion accessory - and help save the world.

Supermarkets sell inexpensive market bags with logos on them, but these days you'll also find more decorative ones at earth-friendly home accessories stores like Bluehouse in Fells Point or Earth Alley in Hampden. This month Nordstrom will start selling an "eco-chic" reusable shopping tote in its accessories department for

\$21.95. The bag will be made of metallic brushed linen decorated with a cityscape illustration by artist Ruben Toledo. And reusable bags are on the Internet, of course.

Georgia Walsworth, 59, of Baltimore is a fan of the fashion-forward Baggu bag from baggubag.com. "It's great-looking, no ugly logos and weighs next to nothing," she says. "I have to admit to actually enjoying walking out of the store with that bag full of good things - baguette sticking out, fennel leaves spilling over the edge. It doesn't feel the same with the garish, logo-laden bags from Giant, Whole Foods or TJ's [Trader Joe's]."

Plastic bags, say environmentalists, take large amounts of oil to manufacture, pollute soil and water, and can be toxic for animals. In a landfill, plastic bags take a thousand years to break down. It's been estimated that the United States is now using nearly 400 million of them a year. Paper bags are better but still waste valuable resources.

Recently the Whole Foods Market chain stopped offering plastic as a choice. Some supermarkets have hopped on the eco-bandwagon by offering a small rebate if shoppers bring their own bags.

The process of switching to bags made of fabric, mesh or recycled materials can be easier if they look good, too. It's something of a chain reaction, says Molly Prentiss of baggubag.com, which has gotten good press from magazines such as Teen Vogue.

"In the last few years, there has been an increasing interest in 'green' products," says Prentiss, "especially



products that individuals can use to make their own lives easier and more environmentally friendly. As more people start using reusable bags, others become aware of this and start to feel a sense of responsibility - even guilt - when they use plastic bags."

Baggu bags, made from ripstop nylon, fold up quite small and can be stuck in a purse, which is important if you tend to forget and leave your bags at home when you head for the store. You can recycle your "expired" Baggu bag by sending it back to the company to get a \$1 credit toward a new one, which costs \$8 and includes a little pouch to store it in.

"Demand has exploded" for shopping bags that are neither plastic nor paper, agrees Vincent Cobb, founder of reusablebags.com, which was endorsed by Al Gore in his best-selling documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. "We sold more this Earth Day and the day after than we did in the whole of 2003."

Cobb thinks they started being mainstream and "very trendy" after last year's Earth Day, when using your own shopping bags appeared on just about every media list of top 10 things consumers can do to help the environment. "A big shift is under way."

The brightly colored, 99-cent shopping bags that are the Whole Foods alternative to its paper bags are what got Jessica Lemmo, 29, of Towson/Parkville started. She bought some for her mother, who was sick of the "piles and piles of plastic bags" she was collecting but couldn't find any pretty reusable bags in the small Pennsylvania town where she lived. Lemmo's mother liked the ones her daughter found at Whole Foods so much that she asked for 20 more for people at her work.

Lemmo liked them, too. She ended up buying the pretty bags at Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, although she does most of her shopping at Wegmans.

"They never seem to mind that I use bags from other stores," she says. If a checker does give you a dirty look for using another store's bags, you can always ask, "Would you rather see me in here with another store's bags, or in another store with your bags?"

But some shoppers just don't like being a walking advertisement for a store. They are willing to spend more for bags with no logo, especially if they shop at a supermarket that gives rebates for using your own bags. The bags, they say, eventually pay for themselves.

La Terra in Hampden, for instance, sells Tesoros Trading Company mesh bags for \$12 decorated with mermaids and fruit, and colorful Blue Q vinyl bags in all sorts of patterns for \$18.

"This year they are definitely much more popular," says the store manager, Virginia Harding, who notes that people are buying them this spring particularly to use at outdoor farmers markets.

If you're really serious about saving the environment, look for bags made from recycled materials. Earth Ally in Hampden sells eco-friendly shopping bags like the stylish Ad Bag (\$30) made from nylon mesh ad banners, with handles created with recycled seatbelts and inner tubes.

Owner Eva Khoury calls such bags an example of "upcycling," where the finished product is even better than the materials it's made from. She also sells less-expensive reusable shopping bags, such as a popular one with the slogan "I'm fantastic, not plastic" on it that costs \$15.

It's a good thing Baltimoreans don't expect to get anything out of buying these bags except a good-looking accessory and a heartwarming feeling that they are helping the environment, Khoury says. She's

already talked to the manager of the Safeway on North Charles Street twice about giving a rebate to shoppers who bring their own bags. "He said he'd never heard of that," she says. Even Trader Joe's doesn't give rebates here.

She's given up. "I mean, how many fights are you going to get into?"

Thanks to readers of my blog, Dining@Large (BaltimoreSun.com/DiningatLarge), for help with this article.

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