



May 18, 2008

There's no shame in using plastic bags, just be creative

Katherine Russell
Special to The Desert Sun

Someday soon in a grocery store near you, the plastic bags may go missing. I'm not talking about your neighborhood's high-end specialty store; I'm talking about the place where you buy cola and canned tuna. You have seen the articles about the problems these flimsy totes pose to the ecosystem. People tend to toss them in places other than trash cans and we see them wafting untidily along the highway. Even when bags find their way into the municipal landfill, they create a disposal problem. In response, some cities, notably San Francisco, are voting themselves into bag-free zones.

I am all for protecting our environment, but I worry about sweeping, high-minded proposals. How do such initiatives affect people at the fragile end of the economic spectrum? Many lower- or fixed-income people do not recycle; they reuse those plastic bags. They use them in place of trashcan liners, Ziploc freezer bags, sandwich bags and Fido's poop receptacles. They use them as an alternative for shoe bags, storage containers, drawer separators and holiday ornament containers. They stuff pillows with them or caulk windows to keep out chilly breezes. They clean up kitty's mess when she throws up a hairball instead of using paper towels.

When I was 8, I made fun of a boy who came to school with his lunch of apple butter sandwiches wrapped in the original packaging from his family's loaf of Wonder Bread. My sandwiches, wrapped in waxed paper, rested in a crisp paper sack. When she heard about my behavior from my teacher, my mother who had grown up in the Great Depression, gave me a lecture that made me cry. She knew that for any family, Wonder Bread wrappers are only an economic downturn, a downsizing or family tragedy away.

Wouldn't it be fairer if affluent people curbed their enthusiasm for specialized storage containers rather than depriving poorer people of the humble, but versatile plastic bag? I remember life before specialized storage. We got on very well without transparent shoeboxes. We wrote the shoes' description on the end of the box in which they came. Moreover, it is hard to repurpose a container designed specifically for long holiday wrapping paper tubes.

Of course, not every well-off person is subdividing her closets with see-through storage vessels. Watercolorists used plastic bags to create pleasing effects in their paintings. Decorators tell me a resourceful painter created the faux Tuscany look on my bathroom walls with scrunched bags. I use bags to plump blouses in my suitcase when I run out of tissue paper. Mother stuffs bags around fragile items to protect them for shipping. The precedent is there, we just need to open ourselves to new applications. In a green world, receiving a gift packed in Albertsons bags should be viewed as trendy, if not downright chic.

Our efforts will make a difference. According to the Sierra Club, if New Yorkers used one less grocery bag per person per year, Gotham would reduce its waste by 109 tons, saving \$11,000 in disposal expenses. Furthermore, several environmental organizations believe that compared to recycling or paper only programs, reuse is a superior environmental strategy.

Before they jump on the anti-bag bandwagon, governments should ponder the consequences of bag edicts on all their citizens. Grocers should continue to provide customers with a choice between

plastic and paper, and let the buyer decide what works best for her household. Grocers also should train their employees to put more than one item in a bag, and shoppers should just say no to bags for goods that come with handles.

Consider going without some of those pricey custom storage solutions. Put used bags in your car, so that you can take them in to the store to receive your next load of groceries.

If you hand your Vons bagger a few Ralphs grocery sacks, maybe she will try harder to earn your business. And every time you stand over the trashcan ready to toss that ubiquitous bag, remember the little boy with the apple butter sandwiches.

Katharine A. Russell writes about the American experience from Palm Desert CA. Reach her at Russell@rwwra.com.
