

Paper or plastic? Or B.Y.O.B?
The Green Notebook

What seems like a simple question while at the grocery store might not be so simple after all. The 1980s saw a switch from paper bags to plastic as plastic is less expensive. But, due to customer complaints, consumers now have a choice. So which choice is better, environmentally speaking? How about neither. Here are some facts:

Paper bags, while recyclable and made from a renewable source, aren't such a great idea. The amount of energy, chemicals and water that goes into manufacturing and recycling paper bags is greater than that used to make and recycle plastic bags. About 80 percent of paper bags still find their way to a landfill, where the biodegradable product doesn't actually biodegrade. Paper loses its ability to disintegrate when it is buried under other garbage.

So plastic is the way to go? Plastic bags require oil in their manufacturing—in the U.S. alone, an estimated 12 million barrels of oil are required to produce the 100 billion plastic bags used annually. They are easily recyclable, however each year, Americans throw away billions of these plastic bags, with only .6 percent being recycled. Most end up in landfills, but thousands end up airborne. According to worldwatch.org, plastic bags are caught in fences, trees, the throats of birds, sea turtles, whales and other marine mammals and they clog gutters, sewers and waterways. In Ireland, where the ever-present bags are sometimes referred to as their "national flag," a per-bag tax was implemented in March 2002, which led to a 95 percent reduction.

It's really a toss up which bag is better for the environment, according to Grassroots Recycling Network. The real solution? How about BYOB. Bring your own bag. Here is what Grassroots suggests:

- Carry reusable cloth bags (all those tote bags accumulating? Throw them in the car and have them ready for your next trip to—or visit reusablebags.com or earthwisebags.com. Also, Trader Joe's and Whole Foods offer reusable bags for very cheap)
- Learn to say "no thanks" when you really don't need a bag—if your purchase is small and easy to carry, skip the bag.
- Keep a cardboard box or two in your car's trunk and load it directly from your cart. Just put the box in your back seat.
- If you do use paper or plastic, you can use them over and over for groceries or other things. Then, be sure and recycle (most grocery stores in town and Wal-Mart have recycling bins for the bags—just drop them off next time you are in to shop). Plastic bags can be recycled into many different products including composite lumber, new bags, pallets, containers, crates and pipe. Remember they need to be clean, dry and empty (take out the receipts) before you recycle the bags.

Sometimes I feel kinda silly reaching into my purse and pulling out my foldable, reusable bag (it's really big and folds up tiny) at the checkout, but I figure the clerks have seen everything at least once and I feel better, when I remember to use it, knowing that I am doing my small part. Really, I just like to make my teenager roll his eyes!

Tuesday Trippier lives in Delaware, is a writer and mother of three, with a special interest in green living. She earned her journalism degree from Otterbein College.