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Way beyond recycling: How some Bay Area families are trying to get to zero waste



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Anne-Marie Bonneau vowed to never again buy anything made of plastic after she and her daughter read about the garbage choking the oceans back in 2011. Alarmed, they decided to become a zero-waste family. It was a real struggle at first.

“I remember standing in the bathroom tissue aisle at the grocery store, staring at all the plastic and thinking how are we going to do this?” Bonneau, a down-to-earth 49-year-old says over cups of tea in her sun-dappled Mountain View kitchen. “I realized I had to get off plastic. I also started to think harder about what I eat and what I buy. I had no idea that it would change my life, but it did.”

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Today, she's a zero-waste master. She's got endless glass jars and cloth tote bags. She goes to the farmers market, not the grocery store. She makes her own deodorant and she has shrunk her waste down to a one small shopping bag a year.

Fueled by growing awareness of the planet's ecological woes, the ever-progressive, environmentally conscious Bay Area has become ground zero for the zero-waste movement, which has its roots in the hippie era but has come into vogue in the age of Instagram.

For the record, the goal is for no trash to be sent to landfills or incinerators. The ideal is for all resources to be used in a sustainable manner.

"The Bay Area is one of the best places to go zero waste because there are so many eco-minded people and businesses," says Liz McDade, a Capitola mother of two whose family is also committed to zero waste. "Even a few years ago, people used to come up to me at the farmer's market and ask what zero waste meant. Now they ask me how they can get started."

California has long been an environmental pioneer. San Francisco now has the largest urban composting program in the nation, and many Bay Area cities and counties have adopted zero waste goals intended to promote recycling, reduce food waste and expand public education.

“A lot of the firsts happened here, if you look at curbside recycling pickup and food scraps,” says Jeff Becerra, a spokesperson for Stop Waste, the Oakland-based public agency that oversees waste reduction for Alameda County. “We are a model for the rest of the country.”

Scientists estimate that 19 billion pounds of plastic garbage ends up in the world’s oceans every year, according to a 2015 study published in Science Magazine, and that number is on track to double by 2025. The average American generates about 4.4 pounds of waste a day, and much of it ends up in landfills. A 2016 report from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation warns that by 2050 there will be more plastic in the sea than fish.



A sampling of plastic from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. (Photo courtesy of Ocean Cleanup Foundation) Ocean Cleanup Foundation

“It can be overwhelming,” says McDade, 40, a behavioral psychologist. “It’s easy to go down the spiral of doom, but I am big believer in doing what you can. I try to think of all the small things I can do personally that can help make a change.”

Zero waste has become a driving principle for Bonneau. She bikes to work most days. She bakes her own bread. She even considered giving up toilet paper and switching to cloths but her daughter Charlotte, 17, threatened to move out if she did.

“I’m pretty committed to it. I’m pretty hard core,” says Bonneau, an editor for a local publisher, PlanningShop. “We can’t just stick our heads in the sand. We have to try and do something about the environment. A lot of the plastic packaging is obscene. What’s the point in an indestructible material that you only use for five minutes?”

She spreads the word about fighting plastic pollution on Instagram as [the Zero Waste Chef](#) and is organizing a sewing circle to transform old sheets into produce bags to give away at the farmer’s market.

“A lot of this is just common sense. Our grandmothers knew how to store stuff in glass jars,” notes Bonneau, who remembers her grandmother crocheting a rug out of old bags. “It’s not that hard to reduce a lot of the waste.”

Zero-waste devotees are committed to getting people to rethink the impact of their everyday choices. The goal is to take something as vast and incomprehensible as saving the planet and break it down into simple little things: ditching plastic bags, abandoning coffee pods and forsaking plastic straws (like Starbucks just resolved to do).

“Start small,” says Bonneau, “pick one thing and do it.”

Extreme zero wasters don’t compromise. Mill Valley’s Bea Johnson, dubbed the “Priestess of Waste-Free Living,” has whittled her family’s (two adults, two kids) waste down to a single mason jar a year. She uses pee on her compost pile and citrus trees and says no to gifts that include plastic.



Anne Marie Bonneau makes her own deodorant. Bonneau lives in a waste-free lifestyle. She bakes her own bread, makes her own deodorant and generally goes plastic free at all times. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

However, many folks are just striving to be more mindful of what they use and why.

“Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of making progress,” says Bonneau. “Just do what you can and don’t feel guilty about making a mistake.”

If the only change you can make right now is buying shampoo bars instead of the usual stuff in plastic bottles, then do that, she says. Try writing “bags” on the top of your shopping list so you remember to bring reusable options to the store. Order your ice cream in a cone instead of a cup.

McDade refills her old shampoo bottles at a store that lets her buy in bulk. She makes her own vegan butter (no packaging) and is figuring out how to compost her pooch’s poop. She still buys toothpaste (instead of making her own) and digs into a big bag of plastic silverware from her pre-zero waste days for school functions, but she washes the utensils and stores them to reuse.

“We do the best we can,” notes McDade, who runs [No Trace](#), a shop that specializes in cotton totes and beeswax wraps. “When my parents visit, they buy packaged stuff.”

McDade’s little girls, Hazel, 9, and Beatrice, 7, are on board with living green. They don’t mind bringing jars and spoons along when they are getting frozen yogurt with friends. They were fine with giving up packaged snacks (cookies, crackers) for bulk snacks (pretzels, chocolate chips).

But they hated it when they had to give up their beloved veggie hotdogs, which got axed for too much packaging.

McDade, whose family of four generates just one small can of trash a month, admits, “It’s hard when they feel like they are missing out.”

Once after a big fight, Bonneau’s daughter Charlotte, then 13, staged an act of teenage rebellion. She bought a plastic water bottle. Another time she smuggled a box of Nutrigrain bars into the house. But she soon relented.

“She felt guilty about it later and decided to make her own granola bars,” recalls Bonneau, who is planning to treat herself for her birthday with a grain mill so she can grind her own wheat.

If making your own everything sounds like too much work, zero wasters say, consider that composting is pretty easy. In the Bay Area, many cities urge people to put food scraps in their green organics bin. Some, like San Jose, fish the food waste out of the trash for you. According to a recent USDA study, Americans waste one pound of food per person per day.

“We’re trying to get people to reduce food waste because the biggest ingredient in the garbage by weight is typically food,” notes Becerra. “If you can keep that organic matter out of the landfill by composting it, you are generating less methane, which means fewer greenhouse gases and less climate change.”

Not all waste can be eliminated. There are some things even Bonneau can’t give up. Like taking a plane to see her elderly mother in Canada. She does feel a little guilty about it, however.

“I think you never actually get to zero, but you can get very close,” she says.

Waste not, Want not: Seven easy things you can do to reduce waste

1. Give up plastic bags and bring reusable ones to the store. Consider that grocery bags, which we use for an average of 12 minutes, can persist in the environment for half a millennium, according to Scientific American.
2. Skip the pod. If you brew coffee or use a French press, you eliminate the need for plastic coffee pods.
3. Buy a refillable water bottle and pass on plastic ones.
4. Try using a shampoo or deodorant bar to eliminate yet another plastic package. Lush has a full roster of “naked” products at www.lushusa.com/naked
5. Get the scoop: Order your ice cream in a cone so you can eat the package.
6. Pass on plastic straws. Drink from the glass or buy a reusable straw.

7. Compost. Many Bay Area cities urge you to toss your food scraps into your green organics or yard waste bin instead of the trash.

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