

Alternatives to Plastic

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[Note: The HTML version of this article, formerly posted at www.mindfully.org with accompanying photographs, is no longer accessible, so the photos the author refers to are not part of this copy of his article.]

Over the past few of years, many people asked for help in getting plastic out of their lives. It is hoped that this article guides you to a cleaner lifestyle. While it is presently impossible to actually remove all plastic from one's life, it is definitely worth reducing it to a minimum. Being that the author's age is greater than fifty years, he came into a world that was nearly free of the scourge that has come to fruition since then. His own attitude contrasts greatly with most anti-plastic activists - he is considerably more adamant about removing all plastics from his life and not so concerned about one or another type of plastic or single chemical within each. It is also through years of research that he has seen that all plastics must be stopped rather than one or even many. But as you approach this subject, please do so at a pace that doesn't overburden you into dropping the issue altogether. But do move along as quickly as is practical.

Below are images of the my container collection used in contact with food and drink. Each is labeled and some have suggestions for other uses and sources. These are most likely what you came to this article for. However, getting plastic out of your life is more about a change in lifestyle than merely removing a few plastic containers in your home. I am working on a book that will include suggestions for a lifestyle change. What it requires is simply using common sense and a healthy disrespect for status quo. Stop worrying about looking out of place in a world injected and coated with plastic. Start your lifestyle change by disconnecting from consumerism and commercials. Disconnect the cable - 500 stations with nothing intelligent on any is a crime. Stop your newspaper subscription. Considering that newspapers are more than half advertising and don't tell the truth, it's a crime to use new or recycled paper for this purpose.

Lifestyle changes are things that I have taken on gradually over the years. Nobody told me what to do. All it took to learn was to think logically about what I was doing. I'd locate things of this nature that needed to be done differently and find a way to accomplish the change. Here's one of my latest changes. I used to purchase organic ketchup in glass bottles. Over the last few years, there were fewer manufacturers that packed it in glass bottles. Then the last one to pack ketchup in glass was the company Seeds Of Change, which is now controlled by M&M/Mars. And we all know what type of health food that M&M/Mars is famous for - vitamin C (candy, chocolate). [Read "The Green Machine"] {1} So, the day they stopped packing ketchup in glass, I started cooking my own. It is substantially better than any store-bought on the market now or in the past because I make it to please my own taste instead of blindly buying whatever some scientist advised the company to make. I make a few quarts at a time and can it in pint-size jars.

Because our regulatory system was created to protect the interests of the corporate producers, it seems that one of the best ways to regulate them is to first be forewarned of the environmental

and social toxicity they produce and just refuse to buy it. If we can do this, then they will change or be run out of business. But whatever we do, we must produce and consume less, and eat lower on the food chain.

One last thing. Lately, I have seen some sort of biodegradable plates, cups and utensils for sale at the small grocery I shop at, as well as the Hole (aka Whole Foods). I see them as just another ploy to maintain the consumerist status quo. We really don't need such stuff except for "emergencies". And I don't believe that a material that has had unnatural acts perpetrated on it can return to the earth in its original state. Single-use containers, bags and other products should not be used. Their use can never be a sustainable act, no matter what the manufacturer claims. These products are counterproductive, making the purchaser feel as if they are doing some good in the world, when in fact they are not. Sorry for the let-down if you use this stuff. But you didn't come here for

Sincerely, Paul

Glass milk bottles

Organic milk comes in these and they are produced by only one manufacturer in the USA at this time. There is a list on Mindfully.org of dairies using such bottles. {2} Please add your dairy to the list if they use glass bottles. These bottles are perfect for refilling with other drinks such as orange juice, lemonade, water to drink or to water plants with. Because the cardboard containers that orange juice is packed in is coated with plastic (polyethylene) {3}, pour it into one of these bottle when you get home from the grocery store. Nonorganic milk is made from cows injected with rBGH {4}, a growth hormone that causes mastitis, which in turn requires the cows to get antibiotic injections. Nonorganically-raised cows are fed pesticide-ridden grains and genetically engineered feed such as Monsanto's Roundup Ready corn. {5} The food they eat is also grown with sewage sludge {6} as fertilizer. Here's a general article titled, "Why Eat Organic Food? {7}

Small glass jars

They come in a wide variety of sizes and shapes. When they are empty, most people recycle them. I do that too, but many are saved from products such as mustard purchased at a grocery store, jelly purchased at the local Farmer's Market, apple juice bottles purchased along the way when my own ran out or couldn't find a good source of water. The lack of uniformity is in part a sort of fashion - mostly a denial of fashion - but it is also a means of reduction of waste and consumerism. The heights of the jars fit in a kitchen drawer with almost no space to spare. Write the names of the spices in small script on scraps of paper from your recycling bin and tape them to the top of the jars so they are visible without lifting them.

Aslan the cat loves us because we have glass bowls for his food and water. His dry food is kept in a large glass bottle and refilled from twenty or thirty pound bags.

Tiffin

Aslan likes this stainless steel tiffin that was purchased at an Indian goods shop. The shop I got it at carries a wide range of stainless steel goods such as round spice boxes, cookware, cutlery,

bowls, trays, plates, containers, tea & coffee sets, and more.

Large glass bottle

One of the two smaller glass jars in front had honey in it that was purchased at the Farmers' Market. The other was from something like pickle relish. They are used for smaller quantities of stuff like dried fruits. The larger jars (one gallon) were purchased from a great herb shop, Lhasa Karnak Herb Company in Berkeley. {8} The one on the left has flour in it and can hold about five pounds. And the one on the right has cereal from the bulk foods area of the grocery store. I buy it by the case and save an additional ten percent. When the glass bottle is empty, we refill the cereal from the case using a metal soup ladle. The next size down on the right has oatmeal in it. Before plastic grabbed the honey people, I had been purchasing honey in jars that size. I think it holds about five pounds of honey. It may still be possible to find pickles in the larger jars. But probably they've been plasticized as well though. The smallest jar on the left is a small size from the Farmers' Market honey vendor, and the one on the right is from some store-bought product. I buy as little prepared foods as possible. And almost no prepared foods in metal cans. The lids on bottles, even canning jars, are coated with plastic. But if the bottle is stored upright, the contact is quite minimal.

Mixing Bowls

Mixing bowls are commonly made of plastic these days, as are all other kitchen implements. But stainless steel is making a comeback. The yellow bowl is an old Pyrex bowl that was my mother's. Some foods must be kept away from metal, so find out about them. There is no store that sells all of the kitchen tools and containers on this page. They were accumulated over a few years. The yellow bowl was my grandmother's.

Stainless Steel Colander

Not all of these stainless steel colanders are created equal. It's worth holding out for one that has many holes at the lowest point so as to drain more easily and effectively. This one is just okay, no better. If I need to drain pasta, I might do it by placing the pan's lid slightly off, leaving a gap that is a bit smaller than the pasta. Sometimes I use a stainless steel wire mesh colander or strainer. Be sure to thoroughly rinse and scrub them before the pasta has a chance to dry on them. Do it before eating.

Here's a top view of (left to right) a colander, food mill and a strainer. A chinois (not shown) works well too. It has conical shape, with the tip pointing down. I use the strainer for sifting flour and straining the solids from a stock.

Food Mill

This food mill is great for crushing tomatoes. The seeds and chunks of skin are left behind. I once had one of those stylish kitchen tools called a Cuisineart food processor. It took more time to clean it than it was worth. It also wastes a lot of space in the small kitchens that many people have. And for some of us, cranking the food mill or chopping with a knife is the only exercise we

get. I do have an old blender that has a glass top rather than a plastic one. I think the newer models have polycarbonate tops. Lexan is one brand of polycarbonate plastic. To learn about polycarbonates, please read this article: “Get Plastic Out Of Your Diet”. {9}

Cast iron waffle mold

This one was made in about 1860 and purchased online for about \$25 including shipping. It was my birthday present a couple years ago. It makes exquisite waffles without being exposing us to the Teflon coating that is standard with all waffle makers today. {10} See that these glisten from the oil coating. They need to be “seasoned” before using them so as to keep the batter from sticking and so that they don’t rust. Did you know that cooking in a Teflon-coated pan can kill your pet bird? Teflon is also being used in a rapidly expanding set of cloth consumer goods as Gore-Tex. {11} It supposedly seals out the rain, but unfortunately, it also seals in body moisture in the form of sweat. I avoided it for years because of that. But having learned it is just another form of Teflon, I feel the need to warn others.

One-Gallon Glass Jug

Ahhhh! Bernie’s apple cider. Where I live, there is a constant threat of earthquakes. After rinsing several times and washing in the dishwasher a few times, they get filled with water and stored in the cardboard cases they came in. The cases have cardboard dividers that keep the bottles from touching each other. If the house fell on them they would most likely break. But then, so would plastic jugs. They get stored in all areas of the house.

Glass Refrigerator Storage

These are Pyrex with a plastic lid. At the time I purchased these, I could find none with glass lids. I therefore allow food to cool thoroughly before putting the lids on. I start by cooling the food in it on the counter for a little while. When it is closer to the ambient room temperature, place it in the refrigerator without the lid for a while. Before leaving or going to bed, seal the lid on it. But be very careful not to cool meat in an open container. If I need to cool meat, I do it in the refrigerator. If it is in a stew, I place it in a bowl floating in cold water. If it needs to be done very quickly, put ice in the water. Ice is energy intensive, so use it sparingly.

Bulk peanut butter in a salsa jar

Buy only as much as you’ll consume in a week or so. For me, that’s less than 1/2 a jar full. Weigh the jar and mark the weight on the top or side so that it may be subtracted at the cash register. Ask the manager about this before filling the jar. I had been purchasing olive oil as a bulk commodity in one-quart juice bottles until I found an olive farmer who will refill that ten-litre stainless steel container above. I keep extras of these so I can buy fresh peanut or almond butter while the old one is being washed.

Lids

At left are canning lids and at right used lids from a variety of products. Canning lids can be used

more than once if they are handled carefully. One way to extend their useful life is to trade them for lids from other jars. For instance, you might purchase tomato sauce with the same size lid as canning jars. Once the canned fruit or vegetables are opened, rinse off the lid and replace it with the other lid. If you see a scratch or rust spot on the inside face, then do not reuse the canning lid.

Nonplastic Kitchen Tools

The thing that looks like a rake is for pulling spaghetti from the water or a bowl. There are a couple old wooden spoons, some spatulas, a pastry brush hiding in the back, a large bottle brush and a pair of heavy-duty kitchen shears. All are in a ceramic container.

You can carve your own spoons and tools out of solid blocks of wood. I have a retired neighbor who makes wood bowls for his grandchildren.

Bulk Liquid Storage

Ten-litre stainless steel container with spigot made by Fustinox used for olive oil. {12} I keep it cool in the basement and refill the glass bottle topped with a natural cork from a wine bottle. Brown glass protects the contents from ultraviolet sunlight, but green does not. The brown bottle is 1/2 litre beer bottle. Any size one needs is available.

Old wine and beer bottles can be cut with a glass cutter to make table glasses. There are special cutters one can purchase, but with a little practice you can make a simple jig and use a small hand-held glass cutter that is typically used to cut window panes or mirrors. Mark the bottle where it is to be cut. Keep a firm and steady pressure on the bottle with the cutter. Turn the bottle at the same time. The trick is getting the score to begin and end at the same place. Tap it with the balled end of the cutter and the two parts should separate. Sand off the cut edge using a fine 320 grit silicone carbide paper, being careful not to breathe or get any of the dust in your eyes. Afterwards, wash the glass as well.

Lunch Containers for School or Work

Padded cases for carrying in backpack for lunch at work or school. The glass bottle is a twelve-ounce juice bottle from Bernie's cider. The flatware is purchased very inexpensively at a salvage shop. The food container is a Pyrex round glass container (see above). Food that goes into it is always cold and is kept cool by the padded case. I also try to keep the lid pointing up if possible. And always remove the lid before heating the food in the container. Never ever microwave food in anything. What is meant by this is that microwaving is unhealthy in any container, whether it is plastic or glass. Microwaving increases free radicals that promote cancerous cells. Many daycare centers heat children's food in plastic Tupperware containers. But you should be sure not to allow them to do this with your child's food. There are many ways of avoiding it. One is to serve is cold. What's better is to let it sit out for a half-hour before serving. But this kind of practice would be next to impossible to get the staff to do. Serving cold would be more likely to happen. If microwaving still is the only method acceptable to parents and staff, then do so without the lid on. Write on the lids with black markers, "REMOVE LID BEFORE HEATING!!"

Cast Iron Muffin Pans

Cast iron muffin pans from Lodge Mfg must be seasoned with cooking oil to reduce sticking. {13} The muffin holes are a bit too small for my liking, but they work great.

Stainless Steel Canteens

Stainless steel canteens by Kleen Kanteen. {14} Be sure to get the stainless steel lids with them. I have two sizes - twenty ounces and 44 ounces.

Large and small stainless steel bowls

I use the large sixteen-inch stainless steel bowl for mixing large batches of bread and the seven-inch one is sometimes used for really small jobs. My favorite bread recipe is a modified version from Edward Espe Brown, *The Tassajara Bread Book* Shambhala Publications, Berkeley (1970). This bowl is big enough for about four or five heavy whole wheat loaves. I also use it as a serving bowl at picnics and other events when I need to feed many people. It'll hold about two pounds (dry) of cooked pasta with a tomato sauce or a great big bean salad. Enameled bowls and pots work. If they get overheated, the glazing with craze and later fall off in minute particles.

Large Enameled Cast Iron Pan

Purchased as slightly damaged at a sale in the mid-1970s for about twenty percent of the price for a perfect one at that sale. It gets used pretty much every day. There's no Teflon coating. {10} It's heavy but does a great job of cooking food evenly. Nonenameled cast iron pans work just as well and can be purchased at tag sales because the seller usually has the "modern" nonstick Teflon-coated pans that offgass some pretty terrible fumes that can kill your pet bird and get into your body too. Can Teflon affect you and your family? Of course it can. But did you know that Teflon is being used in just about every kind of product that is made with cloth? It's called Gortex. {11} Your feet probably don't get as hot as a frying pan, but there has been no meaningful testing of such products done to my knowledge.

Mismatched stainless flatware and ceramic plates

Purchased at a shop that sells used goods. One or two of each may have a match. They take the place of paper plates and plastic utensils. Use them at home or at a picnic. If you take them on a picnic, be sure to wrap them sufficiently. I use cloth napkins and towels, and/or paper from my recycling bin. Cloth napkins will be needed anyway, so using them as packing will save space and protect the plates. Pack them into a big canvas bag and be sure to secure the bag on the trip to the picnic. It's a heavy load. But people rarely complain about their cooler full of beer and soda, which, by the way, we shouldn't drink anyway. Well, maybe just one or two beers ... please.

Camp wear

Purchase stainless steel plates and mugs at a camping goods store and use them with the mismatched flatware from a store that sells used goods.

Measuring cups and spoons

Glass and a glazed cast iron pie plates

Stainless steel steamer

Adjusts itself to fit the pot it is placed inside of. I steam a lot of food. Sometimes I use a large cylindrical steamer that fits atop a large pot. It has room for a few ears of corn, some small potatoes and a half-head of cabbage that is cut into smaller sections.