

Shopping Green: Making a Difference as a Consumer

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The problem is solid waste and what to do with tons of it produced each year in the United States. One answer is “shopping green,” something every consumer can do to avoid producing the waste in the first place.

In 1996, each person in the United States, according to Environmental Protection Agency figures, produced an average of 4.4 pounds of solid waste a day, adding up to 208 million tons of municipal solid waste a year. Most of the waste went to one of the 3,091 landfills across the nation. The rest was incinerated, reducing the need for landfill space but creating harmful air emissions and ash for disposal. Neither landfills nor incineration solve the long-term problem.

Shopping green means making decisions that avoid bringing things into your home or work area that will end up as waste in a landfill or incinerator. The next time you shop, ask the following questions.

Do I really need this item? If you already own or can borrow something to serve the same purpose, don't waste money or bring something else into your home or workplace when it will become waste later.

Can I minimize the amount of packaging I purchase? The Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control estimates that up to one third of all purchases are for packaging. So, when possible, save money and storage space by purchasing items with no packaging. Otherwise, buy only goods that come in recycled, recyclable, or reusable containers.

Am I buying more than what I need? When you purchase more than the essential quantities of products, you increase both the storage space required as well as the likelihood of having to dispose of excess later.

Is this product durable or will I have to replace it? Spending more for a better quality product will avoid having to dispose of and replace a less durable item. Remember that disposable products that are marketed for their convenience will end up in a landfill or incinerator.

Is this product hazardous to the environment? Examine the product label. Minimize the hazard by choosing a product with a “warning” or “caution” statement rather than one labeled “poison,” which indicates a greater hazard. While this decision won't directly reduce the amount of waste you produce, it will reduce the amount of pollutants released

into the environment. For example, glass cleaner in a pump spray bottle is less hazardous than the same cleaner in an aerosol container.

Can I reduce transportation waste by refusing or reusing shopping bags? Refusing a shopping bag or taking along a reusable one is an easy way to reduce the amount of waste you generate.

For more information on shopping green, contact Michelle Guitard, Orise Participant, DSHE, (410) 306-2265.