

The Bag Story

How did we get ourselves into this mess with plastic bags? I always remember my early days as a new bride in London. I was brought here 40 years ago and installed in a furnished flat in South Kensington before my husband took off to Kuala Lumpur on a 3 week business trip. I set about rather tentatively exploring the immediate neighbourhood of my new home. I found it very different to my native land. The very basics were odd, the light switches were upside down, the less said about the loo paper the better and food was a bit of a problem. I was used to shopping in supermarkets, and the little groceries with the counter over which I had to request my requirements was daunting, the butcher with its rabbits and ducks hung in the window very off-putting, and all the shops seemed to close at the drop of a hat (closed for lunch, early closing, half-day Saturdays) and of course the money was a total mystery. So I was feeling quite homesick and not a little hungry when I discovered heaven – a Safeway supermarket in Kensington High Street. Here was shopping and food I understood. I went round with a grin filling a basket. The checkout was familiar, and I managed to pay the clerk before disaster fell. I waited for the bag boy to bag up my stuff, while she waited for me to take away my goods. She finally demanded that I remove my purchases, and when I admitted that I had nothing to put them in, she did a lot of tutting before a large carton was found for me, which I think I had to promise to bring back. In those days, the British provided their own grocery bags or baskets, and you wouldn't dream of going shopping without one. (I, of course, was accustomed to the iconic American brown paper bag which was almost as ecologically sound, since we all used them for containing garbage before they went to the landfill and biodegraded).

So here we all are, realizing that the onset of the plastic bag has been a disaster for the planet, trying to recapture that 40 year old system. We have the cloth and 'lifetime' bags now – the difficult part is remembering to take when going shopping. Recently Sainsbury's offered an alternative shopping bag for a fiver and they flew off the shelves, though this may have been more to do with the designer label than wanting to save the planet.

For car owners the answer must be to keep a supply of reusable plastic bags in the boot. Bus users can use cloth bags slim enough for the pocket or handbag. I don't know how to eliminate the plastic bags that come with the computer ordered shopping, but any plastic bags we do end up with should be returned to the supermarket for recycling.

Plastic bags are a real drain on nature's resources so it's worth making the effort and over seventy per cent of plastic bag material can be economically recycled.

Christina Nolan

Recycling Note According to WRAP, (Waste and Resources Action Programme) a non profit organisation, recycling in Britain already reduces carbon dioxide emissions by 10 to 15 million tonnes a year. This is the equivalent to a 10% reduction in annual carbon dioxide emissions from transport, or roughly equivalent to taking 3.5 million cars of the road. (Source: The Economist, June 8th, 2007)