

# BAG LADIES COME OUT!

by Dianne Trussell

I saw this statistic in an email newsletter from one of our clients this week: "Australians use and throw away about 6 billion plastic bags every year – not one of those bags will break down in your lifetime nor can plastic bags be recycled in your kerbside bin!" My immediate reaction was to write something about my own bag use and how people can change this terrible statistic – very easily too, I might add!

I live near the ocean and, like most Aussies, I love the beach and spend as much time there as I can. I also love critters, and have many a time attempted to rescue a hapless seabird whose legs are swollen, infected and being slowly amputated by 'shopping bag bracelets', or felt sorry for the ones who have already lost their limbs or their lives this way. I also do a lot of snorkelling and SCUBA diving, and I can tell you that a plastic bag billowing slowly a few feet under the surface of the water *does* look incredibly like a jellyfish, so I can fully appreciate how turtles and fish are fooled into gobbling them up and suffering the slow death that comes after.

I'm an old campaigner, having been part of the South Australian team who lobbied successfully to have a deposit placed on PET plastic drink bottles to help increase their return and recycle rate, and encourage people to stop throwing them out into the environment or landfill in their gazillions. I was around when the first 'biodegradable' shopping bags came in, and watched as thousands of little fragments of non-biodegradable plastic littered the earth, and cleanups were a nightmare. At least the old bags stayed in one piece and did not instantly crumble when you tried to pick them up! It occurred to me, as a thinker, ecologist and just plain commonsense woman who loves and cares for nature and likes a beautiful environment for us all to live in, that a sunlight-degradable bag won't do much degrading underwater or stuck on the shady side of a tree or hedge or under a tussock of grass. And that's where so many of them end up.

Seeing any kind of plastic on the loose anywhere in the environment gives me the grrrrrs and motivates me to keep up my efforts and educate others. My own behavioural





modification plan pretty much took off when the plastic bags and bottles began to flood the market (and the environment). It was with delight one day quite recently, doing my weekly shopping using the bags kept in the back of the car, that the next plastic bag I pulled out to put veggies in was a purple muffin bag from the 1980s, paint peeling, but still recognisable, still intact, and still serviceable nearly 25 years later.

How is this possible? Simple! I don't consider plastic to be throwaway. It should not be. It is a brilliant invention, a fantastic material, a great re-use of a very old resource (fossil fuel) and an indispensable part of modern life. There's nothing like it and it should be recognised and valued as such. We should be making plastic items strong, durable, re-useable and repairable for the long-term.

So back in the '70s I started keeping shopping bags (mostly brown paper back then), and if they were plastic I'd wash and rinse them along with the dishes after shopping, hang them up to dry on the clothesline and, when clean and dry,

put them into the bigger bags that live in the back of the car for shopping trips. I still do, and will continue to do so until all my bags have worn out and no more enter my life. I don't accept them at the shops – always say "no bags thanks" at the checkouts and load up my purchases in my own bags. I have a collection of plastic shopping bags that housemates have brought home and would have discarded had I not rescued them for re-use, plus some from the packaging of products I need to buy. My shopping bag collection changes composition slowly – there is a steady loss as some disappear to other people's homes carrying home-grown veggies, seedlings, magazines or birthday cakes, and their fate is out of my hands. Some eventually break and have to be recycled if possible or thrown out, due to being manufactured as 'disposable'. Some of these serve a final purpose on their way out, such as disposing of something yukky and unrecyclable to landfill that I've inherited from a previous tenant. It disturbs me to have to leave a legacy to future generations to have to deal with. I just hope the theory is correct that eventually our descendants will find ways to recover all materials. They'll have to – no spare planets on the horizon just yet!



New bags creep into my collection as visitors bring things to my home in them and leave them behind. And occasionally one comes, already re-used, from a garage sale. A problem is the plastic inner wrappers around processed food such as muesli and even hydroponic fresh veggies at the farmer's markets. I consume as little of these as I can, but it's endlessly annoying that they even exist – why don't we already have a different way of doing this? Do container manufacturers truly lack imagination and initiative? Why must change always be expected to come from consumers grumbling about what's being foisted onto us, or doing boycotts or petitions about just about everything in hopes of having an effect?

Back to practicalities: I sort my bags into a few convenient categories in my car and on hooks in my pantry:

### **Paper**

These are all kept flat and neat in rough size order inside a large paper bag with handles. A few smaller ones live in my day bag so when I buy takeaway sandwiches or see some nice nuts, etc., I can present my own bag. Once they split or get too grungy, they get composted. Clean torn ones get recycled. Some get opened out to use as wrapping paper for posting parcels (why buy plastic envelopes?). Some get opened out to use as clothing drawer liners. Some stay in my landcare bag for seed collection and storage (plastic makes the seeds go rotten). And some even get marbled artistically to use as gift wrap.

### **Plastic mesh orange bags**

Kept for shopping but also for keeping critters off special plants in the veggie garden, for straining leaves out of potting mix, for kids to keep in their beach bags for collecting stones and shells – one dip in the ocean and all the sand falls out through the holes – easy peasy! And of course for keeping small or ribbony items safe in the washing machine. You can buy the clasps to keep them closed.

### **Big plastic supermarket bags**

Stored in a bag of the same kind for easy recognition. I love these for large buys that could use their own bag, like apples, silverbeet, lettuces, etc. They are good for bringing home wet swimwear without sogging up the rest of your beach bag, and for transporting potted plants, food, etc. Once they are all dead and gone, I'll switch to entirely paper or fabric – yep, I've sewn some cotton bags out of scrap material to use for fruit and veggie items, especially potatoes and beetroot, which make bags dirty. Cotton bags are great, as you can just throw them in the washing machine with the towels!

### **Other plastic bags**

*(like cereal box liners and department store bags)*

Flat in a large, stiff, flat bag so I can see the length and width easily when choosing one for some purpose, such as protecting a book in my beach bag or backpack, packing clothing and toiletries in categories in my suitcase, etc.

### **Zip seal bags**

What a treasure! I re-use these for countless purposes for their lifetime. My digital camera batteries in its travel pouch; lens caps and tissue; screws and washers; flash drives in my handbag; moisturiser and make-up so it doesn't leak everywhere when it's hot; small items for camping and backpacking; little knickknacks that belong to various machines, devices and items and would get lost if they were not in a zip-seal clipped onto the item or in its wrapper, like airbed bungs, spare O-rings, you name it. The bigger zip-seals are great for taking non-waterproof stuff, like books, out on boats. Medium ones are great for things like shredded coconut or sesame seeds that will make a mess if they get loose in your shopping. But notice how the bottoms always eventually split – were they designed that way on purpose to limit their re-usability?!

### **Plastic wrappers on office stationery**

These stay flat in a clear bag kept rigid with a bit of cardboard, and used for protecting posted sheets or documents, especially when the destination is likely to be a damp letterbox.

### **Cotton and hemp shopping bags**

Some of the supermarkets sell these and I love their strength and their total bio-usability. They are also great for storing and transporting clothing, as they breathe well in damp weather.

### **The so-called 'solution'**

Last but not least, there's the new generation of woven poly 'eco-friendly' (but just as darn non-bio-useable) green and blue and purple bags proliferating at an alarming rate for sale near the supermarket checkouts. The same rules apply – instead of continuing to buy them until you have more than you can possibly use, stick them in the back of the car with your collection of paper and plakky bags in them and *re-use* them! However, the best shot is to grab a few of the Fair Trade or Aussie-made, truly eco-friendly bags hand-made out of raw hessian, hemp, etc. I have a beauty that was sent as a sample to the magazine office by one of our clients and I use it every day to take my lunch, water, spare clothes and odds and ends to work. It actually feels nicer than the supermarket poly bags and will be compostable when it finally dies.





Doing all the above is no drama – if you just shift attitude, start seeing the bags as a valuable resource that you are responsible for and put away as you go, it's hardly noticeable in the flow of your day and they are all there waiting for you when you need them. After all, you clean and put away the dishes, the clothes, the toys, the tools ... why not your shopping bags?

I've been regularly ridiculed by people I've lived with. Other shoppers eye me suspiciously or with embarrassment. I've been plied with gratitude by disorganised friends when we're out and about and I'm the only one who can produce a useable bag from my day pack for whatever purpose imaginable that's called for at the time. I've been just as regularly praised by shop assistants lamenting the plastic bag conundrum and vocally wishing that everyone would do as I do. I've been called "The Bag Lady" by my local health store owner; he means it as a compliment, but there is still a kind of bemused smile as if I am some rare and peculiar species that one seldom encounters and does not understand. Why do I seem to be such a rare creature in this regard?

Way back in the early '60s when I was a kid in primary school we learned about the environment in our school textbooks. It wasn't called "The Environment" then; it was just simply a case of: this is how the earth and nature and agriculture work and it's just commonsense and intelligence to look

after the natural resources, soil, air, water, plants and animals if you want it to keep working. And we were raised with the adage: "Waste not, want not". I got the message. Then in high school our curriculum included *The Waste Makers* by Vance Packard. If you haven't read it, it's even more relevant today – definitely worth a read! I got the message there too, big time, and haven't forgotten. *What happened, folks?* How come so many of you forgot? Why did the following 40 years fail to produce 20 million 'bag ladies' in Australia? Why is the environment such a depleted, contaminated, abused mess populated by the first, second and now third of the 'throwaway generations' tossing 6 billion plastic bags per year when we all learned about it decades ago and should have been practising what we learned? No excuses ... it's the attitude that's the problem, and that is within everyone's personal power to change.

Back to the subject of the opening line: I'll celebrate the day when *disposable* plastics are universally banned!

For some inspiring creative uses of used plastic bags, check out The Bag Lady of Austin: <http://tinyurl.com/yeoj9yo>

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