

Becoming an Environmentally Mindful Grocery Consumer

By Madeline Hunt

Grocery shopping: it's routine, it's tedious, it's part of life. Most of us try to be in and out of the store as fast as possible to avoid the long lines or running into someone we don't want to see. When in a constant rush, it's easy to forget that groceries don't just magically appear on the shelves. There is an extremely long process that brings any food item from its home all the way to our local stores, and this process has detrimental effects on the environment. In the United States, there are a few simple things that grocery consumers can do to make trips to the grocery store more environmentally friendly.

First, we can make an effort to shop at locally sourced supermarkets. Most large grocery chains transport produce from thousands of miles away on boats, planes, trains and trucks. The farther away a product is made, the larger its carbon footprint is to get it on the shelf near you. According to Stanford Magazine, produce in the United States is shipped an average of 1,500 miles from its original production site to its final destination, emitting mass amounts of fossil fuels on its way.

By shopping local and sticking to what's in season, the food you buy will automatically have a smaller carbon footprint as this produce comes from local farms and production sites. Additionally, this food is often fresher because it's not sitting on a truck for many days and sprayed with preservatives. Produce from local farmer's markets is usually fresh, seasonal, unpackaged and organic.

Another easy way to make grocery shopping more environmentally friendly is by investing in reusable bags, which are larger, more durable and reliable so you won't have to double bag or worry about your milk carton exploding in the parking lot. Single use plastic bags

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are not biodegradable. They use many natural gases to manufacture and they require fossil fuels to ship, says plastic.edu. These bags do not break down easily and end up blowing onto the streets, clogging waterways and infiltrating other natural environments. This is extremely harmful to wildlife, particularly marine wildlife.

Lastly, shopping in bulk and being mindful of packaging is another way to become a smarter grocery consumer. Most grocery store packaging that we see is excessive and nonrecyclable. In fact, Trey Granger from earth911.com reports that about 30% of garbage in the United States consists of discarded containers and plastic packaging. One way to avoid this is by buying foods that are packaged in either recycled or recyclable materials, which is usually indicated on the exterior of the packaging.

Buying in bulk is beneficial because these items usually have less packaging, have a long shelf life and the larger quantity lasts longer, reducing your need to replenish grocery items so often. Additionally, manufacturers can ship larger amounts of food in bulk quantities, reducing carbon footprint in shipments.

Some may say that they are simply not willing to make these concessions because of pure convenience. It definitely is inconvenient to haul reusable bags into the store or search packaging for a sign that it is recyclable. Your closest store may be a big chain and the local farmer's market may be another six miles down the road.

While taking these measures definitely requires extra thought, time and effort by the consumer, the benefits far outweigh the inconvenience. By making these small changes in our shopping habits, the impact on the environment could be unprecedented. For example, according to plastic.edu, if all Americans made the switch to reusable bags, we could save the lives of more

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than one million seabirds and 100,000 marine animals every year.

Improving the environment and the state of our planet is going to require all individuals on earth to put forth effort. As consumers, we have the ability to decide how we want to spend our money, where we want to spend it and what we want to spend it on. It is time for grocery consumers everywhere to take advantage of our power and use it to make better decisions that will have a positive impact on our planet.

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