

Carrier bags THE BIG DEBATE



I support M&S charging for carrier bags. Trials have shown that it cuts the number of bags being handed out by over 70%. That means less resources being used and less waste.

Actually, I'm really delighted that there's been such a change at the store. I remember shopping at M&S in 1989. When I refused to take a carrier bag with my purchase, the assistant was so desperate for me to have one that she called the manager. After some debate and waving my receipt, I was finally allowed to leave the store bag-less!

Now things are very different. M&S is leading the way as a green business with Plan A, its 100 point eco plan. M&S recognises that there's growing awareness about the amount of waste we all produce – and that carrier bags have become symbolic of the problem.

I'm always being asked about what people can do about plastic bags – and what supermarkets should be doing. The answer is to create less waste. For shoppers that means remembering to bring your own bag shopping and re-using any you do have. And for stores it means encouraging customers to bring their own whilst using the least amount of energy and resources to make bags that are given out.

By
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WHAT'S M&S DOING?

“If M&S customers across the UK cut their bag use by 70% it would save 280 million bags a year.”

M&S is now charging 5p for food carrier bags right across the UK. The money raised from this will be given to Groundwork, an environmental charity, which will use the money to improve 'greener living spaces' across the UK. Trials in M&S stores in Northern Ireland and South West UK have shown that charging for bags is an effective way of getting people to remember to bring their own – and therefore reduce the number given out by stores.

M&S is also making its bags from 100% recycled plastic waste. This is really important because there's not much point collecting lots of waste to be recycled if it's not made into anything useful.

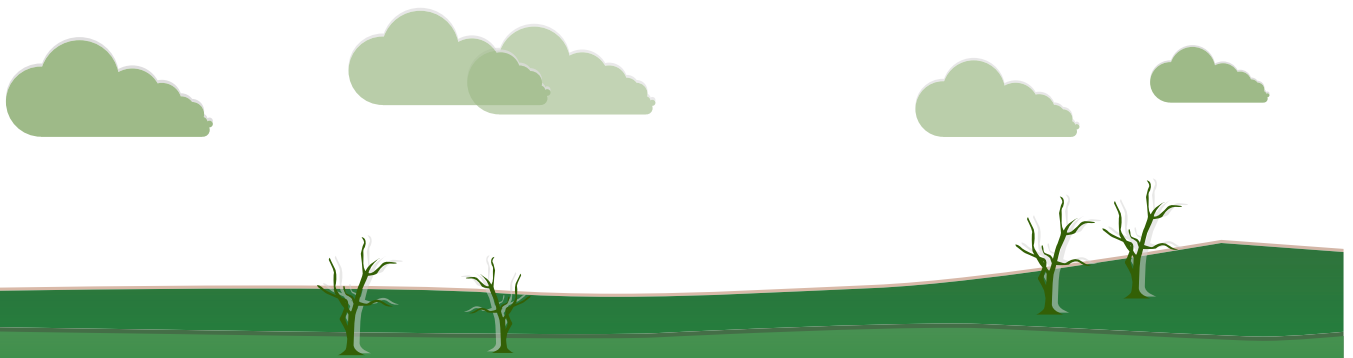
WHAT ABOUT HOUSEHOLD RUBBISH?

Some people worry that if they stop collecting plastic bags they won't have anything to put things like food waste or cat litter into. If you get a good compost bin you don't actually need to put your food waste in a bag. But for other things, like cat litter or dog poo, for example, you could use the inner bags of cereal packets, bread bags or even crisp packets – be creative!

M&S RECYCLED BAGS

These are made from plastic that's already been used which is sometimes called post consumer waste. This includes things like plastic wrappers for clothes and car parts!

Used M&S plastic bags that are returned to stores are recycled into bin liners.



WHY PLASTIC ?

It may surprise you to know that I think plastic bags are the best option for the following reasons:

- Plastic bags are light – they're by far the lightest of all materials used for carrier bags
- Plastic bags are durable – they can be re-used time and again
- Plastic bags are recyclable – they can be recycled *ad infinitum*

Many people think paper bags would be a better option **but I don't**. A paper bag weighs about 6 times more than a plastic bag, takes up to 10 times more storage space and often breaks after a single use. This means that more fuel is used to transport paper bags, more bags are wasted and they take up more space when they're thrown away. And if that's not enough paper bags use about the same amount of oil to produce as a plastic bag.

AREN'T BIODEGRADABLE BAGS THE ANSWER? – NO!

One of the things that worries people most about plastic is that it never goes away – it will still be around in thousands of years' time. So the assumption is that it would be much better if it biodegraded – like a leaf or a rotten tomato. But this isn't actually a very good idea. And here's why – this is what happens to biodegradable and degradable plastics when we throw them away.

In landfill: Most of the waste we throw away ends up in landfill. These holes in the ground are not designed to break down waste, which means that even biodegradable materials can take years to disappear. If and when they do, they'll release methane and carbon dioxide, which are the greenhouse gases that we're trying to cut down on because of their impact on global warming.

In compost: Most biodegradable plastics won't break down in home composting systems and they're not great in industrial composting systems either. Where they do actually break down it will take 4-5 times longer than food and garden waste, meaning that the composting systems need that much more space and equipment to do the same job.

In recycling systems: Plastics recyclers don't like biodegradable plastics. They say that they're difficult to identify and if left in the system can contaminate an entire batch of plastic waste, which stops it **all** being recycled.

As litter: There is a concern that biodegradable, or degradable, bags will make people think that it's alright to litter - and throw them into hedgerows, rivers or the sea. This might not be so bad if the bags disappeared in a matter of days but actually they'll take years, which gives them ample time to be an eyesore or destructive to wildlife.

DEGRADE OR BIODEGRADE?

There are two main types of plastics that degrade or rot. The first is '**biodegradable**', which means that it's made from a plant material and will usually break down in warm and wet conditions. The other is '**degradable**' plastics, which generally means that a chemical additive has been added to make the material decompose when exposed to specific air, light and a certain temperature.

CLEAR BAGS

You can recycle clean, uncontaminated, clear plastic bags used in packaging too. Put them in the same recycling container as plastic carrier bags.

HOW YOU CAN SAVE WASTE

If you want to reduce waste from plastic bags you should:

1. Take a shopping bag with you when you go shopping
2. Make sure any bag you do use is made from recycled plastic (or other recycled materials).
3. Re-use any bags you have as much as possible.
4. Recycle any bags that you don't need any more at your local recycling centre or at an M&S store via any till or customer service desk.

ABOUT GROUNDWORK

Groundwork supports communities in need, working with partners to help improve the environment, the quality of people's lives, their prospects and potential and the places where they live, work and play.

www.groundwork.org.uk



About Julia Hailes

I've been working as an environmentalist for over 20 years writing books and advising companies on what they should be doing. My most recent book *The New Green Consumer Guide* was published in 2007 – it shows you how we can all make a difference

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