

How You can Resolve to Reduce Waste this Year

Did you know that U.S. households generated more than 292 million tons of waste annually in 2018? (EPA) That's 4.9 pounds per person per day! And those numbers are up forty percent from 1990, meaning we create more trash now than ever. But waste is more than just the materials we send to the landfill; it's also the resources, time, and labor to produce the materials that are later discarded as trash.

According to the EPA, "municipal solid waste (MSW) landfills are the third-largest source of human-related methane emissions in the U.S.," most of which is produced by food waste. Beyond that, waste processing, landfill use, and expansion are significant causes for concern. As we throw things away, those materials must be processed and landfilled, leading to expansion or closure, and requiring new landfills to be opened in surrounding areas.

The best way to deal with all this trash is by reducing how much is created in the first place. Imagine you're filling up the bathtub, and it's about to overflow. Do you grab a bucket and start bailing out the water, or turn off the tap first? Turning off the tap stops the flow of water, or for our story, the creation of waste. This analogy is often used when talking about waste reduction. Reducing how much waste you create in the first place keeps it out of the waste stream. A smaller waste stream reduces our need for landfills and other waste processing methods and helps save resources and money. You can avoid excessive waste by making different choices in your everyday life. Here are a few ideas to help you get started.

Consistently using reusable items is an excellent first step. Did you know that more than 60 million plastic water bottles are thrown away daily in the U.S.? Refilling a reusable water bottle four times daily replaces about 1,460 plastic bottles a year. If you use it for multiple years - that's a lot of bottles and a lot of money saved! So wash out that free water bottle you stashed in the back of the cupboard and put it to good use. Keep it by the door or in the car, so you're never without it.

You can also waste less by bringing your own reusable shopping bags. While plastic shopping bags are recyclable, they get tangled in sorting equipment, so they aren't accepted in curbside or drop-off programs. Single-use bags are also light and often fly away, causing harm to wildlife and the environment. An excellent reusable bag can last years, replacing hundreds or thousands of single-use bags. Make it a habit by keeping a few in the trunk or by the door for easy access. Many reusable items save not only resources but money. Reusable cloth diapers, for example, can save an average of \$1,800 over two years. You can find reusable alternatives for paper towels, napkins, facial tissue, straws, to-go containers, food wrap, dryer sheets, cotton swabs, cotton pads, makeup remover wipes, and so much more.

Another great way to cut back is to reduce your food waste. Did you know food waste takes up around 22% of all landfill space? Organic waste trapped in landfills creates harmful methane gas, but when converted into compost and applied to the ground, it improves soil and actually stores carbon instead of releasing it. Plan out your meals and shopping list so you only buy what you will use and then freeze and eat your leftovers. Save food scraps for a compost pile;

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just be sure to leave any oils, meat, or dairy out of your compost pile; it can attract pests and create gnarly odors. Learn how to start your own compost pile at barrycountyrecycles.org.

Buying in bulk and choosing items with less or no packaging or packaging can also cut down on waste. Reusable or recyclable packaging is next-best if you can't avoid packaging. Some types of packaging are especially problematic, like polystyrene (styrofoam) and plastic wrap and films. Polystyrene is not biodegradable under natural circumstances and is challenging to recycle. Plastic food or cling wrap and prepackaged food bags are not recyclable.

Buying second-hand is another excellent way to cut waste and save money. Try the thrift store first if you're looking to update your closet this year. Upscale second-hand stores offer gently used or even new designer items for a much lower price. And instead of throwing your old clothes in the trash, donate them! In the United States alone, 11.3 million tons of textile waste end up in landfills yearly. That's approximately 81.5 pounds per person per year! You may have a new style, but there is undoubtedly someone who still loves your old style. Make it a habit by keeping a donation box in your closet. As items no longer fit or don't fit your new style, toss them in. When the box is full, drop it off at your favorite thrift store and do some shopping while you're there.

Barry County has many local resources to help with any new reduction goals you may have. There are many thrift and second-hand stores, Habitat ReStores, antique and used furniture stores, food donation sites, local farmers markets, and countless shops selling reusable and package-less items.

You can reduce waste by making different choices in your everyday life. In 2023 let's all make a habit of thinking twice every time we open the lid to the trash can. How could I reuse this; can it be recycled, or should it be reduced next time?

Rachel Frantz serves as Barry County's Recycling Coordinator and writes columns to answer commonly asked recycling questions. Have a question about recycling or a topic idea for this column? We want to hear from you! Email recycle@barrycounty.org or visit www.barrycountyrecycles.org for more information and to get all your recycling questions answered.