

Stop and Think about One-Use Waste

By Greg Peterson

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Stop . . . Think for a moment about that item you just tossed in the trash. Often it is a cup, lid, straw, or plastic bag that you used only once, for a short period of time, then tossed “away” to some unknown place called a landfill. Fast-food restaurants buy them by the gross for customers who then dispose of them in the trash. Then the restaurant wraps them all up in a bigger plastic bag and hauls them to the dumpster.

Watching this process countless times through the years started me thinking about items we use only once. The re-evaluation of my consumption habits began in earnest when I found out that Americans use an average of 1,267 plastic bags per person per year – that's 3.8 billion bags per year in the U.S. alone.

That's when I made an agreement with myself that I would no longer use any plastic grocery bags for anything . . . period. So now if I arrive at the store and don't have any of my favorite cloth bags in the trunk, I can only buy what I can carry out.

This decision has made for some interesting shopping adventures. Just the other day I

had the checker pack all my groceries back into the cart and I loaded them individually onto the front seat of my car. It really wasn't a big deal, and while it probably took a couple of extra minutes and looked a little weird, a commitment is a commitment.

Once I started I had to look deeper and more carefully at all of the one-use items in my life. I couldn't believe the sheer volume that I went through on a weekly basis.

Initially I wasn't as concerned because I'm good about recycling, but I then I learned that up to 85 percent of these items still end up in the landfill.

That was it – my journey to lighter living was elevated to passionate. Now I am much more aware of the many ways that I can personally reduce my use.

What started with plastic bags has spread to my entire lifestyle.

To replace the pesky plastic bottle, I purchased a stainless-steel container that I fill from my home water-purification system, eliminating hundreds of plastic bottles that I had used annually. And I've found that many restaurants will fill my bottle which is helping to save numerous cups, straws, and lids. I also enjoy the added bonus of knowing there is no risk of chemicals leaching into my drinks.

The important thing to remember is you do not have to suffer to make impactful changes. If you always use a straw or lid for your cup, and that is something you need, keep doing it. On the other hand, if the wait staff is bringing you a new straw every time you get a refill, you might ask them to stop. You simply have to be aware of what works for you.

Making these kind changes has required little effort on my part but has made a huge impact on reducing the number of items I use. In turn, my effort is helping to decrease the potential negative impact on the environment and my health.

These kinds of changes may seem small on an individual basis, but collectively they make an enormous difference. The most important change we can all make is to be aware of the impacts that our choices generate. Then we can

evaluate different choices and select the ones that make sense in our worlds.

Greg Peterson owns the Urban Farm (www.urbanfarm.org), a sustainability-showcase home on one-third of an acre

in central Phoenix, and is the host of the new television series called "Smart Spaces: Inside & Out." For information on living a green lifestyle, or to weigh in on his Billion Bag, Bottle, & Bulb Challenge, visit his Web site at www.YourGuideToGreen.com.