Reusable bags are the way of the future!

In May 2022, a New Jersey bill will take effect which prohibits most supermarkets - and several other types of retail businesses - from giving out single-use plastic bags.

Why does this matter? Americans use an estimated 100 billion single-use plastic shopping bags each year, which require about 12 million barrels of oil to produce. Each bag is used for an average of 12 minutes, and only 1 to 4% are recycled. It takes upwards of 500 years for a plastic bag to degrade in a landfill, and the end of the degradation process is microplastic particles. Plastic bags are so lightweight that they easily blow away from landfills, going on to become one of the most ubiquitous types of litter. They clog gutters and storm drains. They harm wildlife, especially birds and marine animals who ingest them, and ultimately make their way up the food chain.

What are the alternatives? There are several types of reusable bags on the market. Some are made from cotton or canvas, some from synthetic materials – including recycled plastic bottles. They can be found at most supermarkets, and more and more commonly at other department stores, for as little as a dollar. They can also be found online, which is often more expensive. Some companies give free bags for advertising, [and they can often be collected at conferences.] They are quite strong, and have a much larger capacity than a regular plastic bag, which translates to fewer trips to the car to unload groceries. Reusable drawstring mesh bags for produce are also available, though stores may opt to keep plastic produce bags.

Are they clean? Conveniently, bags with a fabric texture can be tossed into the washing machine between uses, while some of the stiffer, non-woven synthetic bags come with a recommendation to clean them with warm soapy water or a germicidal wipe. [I have put every type of reusable bag in the washing machine with no ill effects].

How will I remember? It will eventually become second nature to bring your own bags into stores along with your keys, cell phone, wallet, and mask. Until then, it will be helpful to keep a few bags in your car at all times, especially where you can see them, such as the passenger seat. Please remember, you can use them at any type of store, they are not limited to groceries!

How do I recycle my old plastic bags? The overwhelming majority of municipalities are unable to take these film plastics with regular curb-side recycling, as they can clog machinery. Instead, many supermarkets and big-box stores have drop-off bins for plastic bag recycling. They are most commonly collected and sold to companies who process them into composite lumber (e.g. Trex decking), or sometimes turned into plastic pellets for further processing. You can recycle most types of plastic film bags including bread bags, newspaper bags, bubble wrap, shrink wrap or the overwrap from other packaging, etc.