One-trip disposable shopping bags are everywhere. They are cheap and readily available, but they come at a high cost to our environment. When these bags are discarded, they can last as long as 500 years in the landfill. That’s why we recognize July 3 as International Plastic Bag-Free Day.

You know how it works. You bring those goodies home and the bag goes in the cabinet with about a million similar ones, it goes in the trash or it blows away in the wind. The bag is used for 25 minutes, on average, but it remains in the world for 100 to 500 years before finally decaying completely. Out in the ocean, there are massive reefs made up of all types of plastic, including millions of plastic bags. Anything we can do to reduce the number of bags used will decrease the amount of plastic waste for generations.

For most of us, responsible bag use boils down to one of two options: don’t use the bags at all or, if you do use them, use them more than once.

Try not using the bags. Get in the habit of bringing your own reusable bags to the store. Our local stores are glad to see you come in with your own bags, and some even offer a discount when you use your own bags. I find that reusable bags hold more food, which results in fewer trips when I transport my groceries to the kitchen. In addition, there isn’t the frustration that results when the one-trip plastic bag splits open, leaving my groceries rolling across the kitchen floor.

Reuse the bags. One-trip bags can be reused, for example, to transport your lunch or to hold a wet swimsuit. Or use them to line a small trash can, make a parachute for your child’s action figures, cushion items in a mailing package or stuff throw pillows that need additional fluff. A friend of mine cuts them into “yarn” that she uses to crochet almost-indestructible bags. I’ve used them to line a paint tray when painting (easier to clean up that way); I even used one to store the uncleaned paintbrush in the freezer until the job was finished the next day.
Nearly all of us have lots of bags around the house. If you need some new ideas on how to reuse them, call us at 474-5211 for a list of “50 Ways to Reuse Plastic Bags.” Adrian Kohrt of our Family Nutrition Program put together this publication from personal experience and a few ideas from the Internet.

If you can’t use up your current supply, return them to the store for recycling. Or take them to the Fairbanks Community Food Bank, where they will be used to organize food or distributed to clients who need them. Many other local agencies take donations of bags for use in their programs.

Plastic bag-free day gives us an opportunity to remind ourselves how important it is to take care of plastic bags responsibly. Even if for only one day, choose to bring your own bags to the store to pick up your goods — the bags you reuse or you don’t take won’t enter the waste stream.

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