



# HOW TO WASTE LESS EVERY DAY

BY ANNA MALTBY  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MITCHELL FEINBERG

Less trash makes for a happier planet, yes. But it could also mean a happier you: Less time spent dragging the can to the curb and cleaning furry leftovers out of the fridge. Fewer dollars spent on extra clothes, food, and other items you could easily live without. And less stuff you don't really like cluttering up your mental and physical space. Ahead, realistic advice to make it happen.

**T**here's a lot of garbage out there. The United States sent 137.7 million tons of trash to landfills in 2015, according to the Environmental Protection Agency—and a recent report found we're on track to run out of space in landfills within the next two decades. China is importing fewer of the recyclable plastics we've been sending there. And far too many items don't make it to landfills or recycling plants in the first place: Think of all the litter along our roads and the sad stories about sea turtles with straws in their nostrils and whales with bags in their bellies.

In some ways, this problem is bigger than any one person. To make a real dent, we'd need our legislators to support more plastic bans, regulate wasteful industries—and be more aggressive about protecting the planet beyond the waste problem. Still, our actions do make a difference. The more consumers and voters start caring about waste reduction in their day-to-day lives, experts say, the more businesses and governments will make it a priority.

**"The best thing we can do, environmentally speaking, is not produce waste in the first place,"** says Jenna Jambeck, PhD, professor of environmental engineering at the University of Georgia and a National Geographic fellow specializing in solid waste. **"I've been totally convinced by my research that, taken collectively, small choices make a difference. These choices, even if we aren't perfect, add up to significant positive impacts over time."**

**You'll see the impact in your life too: less clutter, money saved, new peace of mind. You don't have to take every step experts suggest here—do what works for you. You just might find life is better with less garbage in it.**



## HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

These zero-wasters have ditched the trash can almost entirely. Pick and choose from their tips to shrink your own waste (as well as any eco-guilt).

BY CATHERINE RYAN GREGORY

### Use what you already have.

"I don't encourage anyone to go out and buy things, like a pretty stainless-steel water bottle or organic-cotton shopping bag, in order to go zero-waste," says Tippi Thole, founder of the zero-waste website Tiny Trash Can. "We should be buying less, not more! If I have a plastic item in good working condition, I use it as long as I can." Manufacturing reusable tote bags and water bottles tends to use a lot more resources and energy than manufacturing the disposable versions, so don't churn through them.

### Refuse first.

**People are constantly trying to give you single-use stuff: a flyer on the street, a sample in the store, a bag of stickers and knickknacks at a birthday party. "No matter how much you reduce, reuse, and recycle, you're still the target of many items,"** says Bea Johnson, author of *Zero Waste Home*, who says her family of four creates only a pint of garbage per year. **"Say no on the spot to stop it from becoming your trash problem down the line."**

ILLUSTRATION BY GIACOMO BAGNARA

### Rearrange the trash.

Moving the kitchen trash can somewhere inconvenient, like the garage, forces everyone in the house to consider whether items could be composted or recycled instead. "Just by rearranging the bins and shocking everyone out of the habit of tossing something into the can, we halved the amount of garbage we produced," says Larkin Gayl, who shares zero-waste tips on Instagram at @unfetteredhome.

### Pack reusable necessities.

**Think about the single-use items you pick up most in the outside world (coffee cups? utensils? to-go boxes? straws?) and stash a reusable version in your bag or car so you always have it with you. "We even carry a growler in our car for beer emergencies!"** says zero-waster Sarah Schade, an art and design student in Traverse City, Michigan. **When you come home, remember to wash your reusables and put them back so they're ready to go the next day.**

### Borrow before buying.

You borrow books—why not borrow a weed whacker, stand mixer, or circle saw too? Borrowing things like tools and kitchen gadgets saves you from shelling out for something you'll only use a few times a year. Plus, Lepeltier adds, "connecting with neighbors when you borrow something makes in-life connections and creates community." Search myturn.com and buynothingproject.org/find-a-group, or write a post on Nextdoor. You can also rent tools from many hardware stores and Home Depot locations.

### Green your period.

**If you're up for it, Schade endorses switching to a reusable menstrual cup. Made out of silicone, it typically lasts a year, replacing the 240 or so tampons you might use during that time. (It also keeps packaging, applicators, and sometimes agrochemical-intensive cotton out of the trash.) Or consider period underwear like the ones from Thinx or Dear Kate—they may not eliminate your need for tampons entirely, but you'll cut back in a big way.**

### Raise tiny tree huggers.

"Kids are often the best place to start in your waste-reduction journey because they tend to be more sensitive to the problem and don't have the bad habits we adults do," says Thole. Ask children to help cook (and therefore eat less food packaged in plastic); fill up at the bulk bins together; and talk about the materials that go into making a plastic toy—and the landfill the toy will end up in. But be warned: Soon enough, they may call out your eco-blunders.

### Do a trash audit.

It might sound icky, but poke through your garbage can to find your household's worst waste offenders. (Or just make a note—and ask those you live with to do the same—of what you toss in a typical week.) "Pick the thing that shows up most in the garbage and find a swap for it," says Gayl. For example, she noticed a ton of granola bar wrappers in her trash and started making batches of grab-and-go snacks instead.

### Don't feel like you have to make everything yourself.

"I've experimented with sourdough and making kombucha, but I'm not running a Whole Foods at my home," says Chloé Lepeltier, who blogs about her low-impact lifestyle on the site Conscious By Chloé. The idea is to find habits you can sustain, so only DIY if you enjoy it.

### Invest in a TerraCycle bin.

**The company TerraCycle accepts many items that can't always be recycled locally, like coffee capsules, toothpaste tubes, and potato chip bags. It partners with brands—including Arm & Hammer, Brita, Garnier, Honest Kids, even Solo cups—to offer free recycling of their products. Or you can buy a bin or pouch for a specific need. It's pricey (pouches cost \$42 and up), but that's a deterrent to creating trash, says Gayl: "The cost to recycle motivates me to think before I purchase."**

# WHAT'S IN THE

# WATER

This is the trash most commonly found along American beaches and waterways in 2018.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GIACOMO BAGNARA

## PLASTIC BEVERAGE BOTTLES: 209,803

Switching to a reusable water bottle makes a huge difference. If you must have a bottled drink, recycle.



## CIGARETTE BUTTS: 809,538

A no-brainer: Quit, for your health and the earth. Until you do, don't litter. Dispose of butts (and vape cartridges) in the garbage.

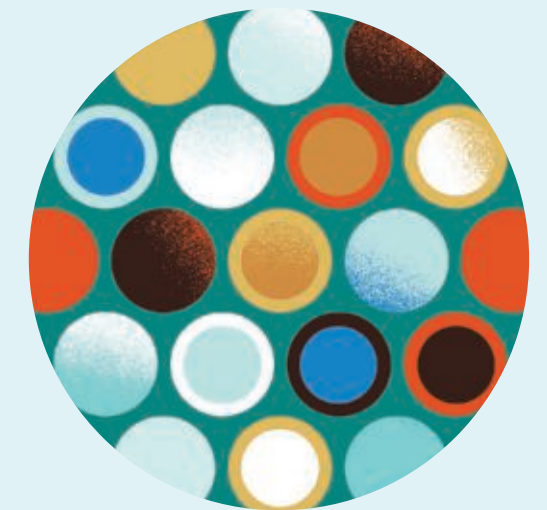


## STRAWS AND STIRRERS: 122,387

Carry a reusable straw in a small case. Try Five Two Silicone Straws (\$25 for 10 straws and 4 cases; food52.com).

## PLASTIC BOTTLE CAPS: 268,244

Check your local recycling program for how to dispose of plastic caps—rules vary from place to place.

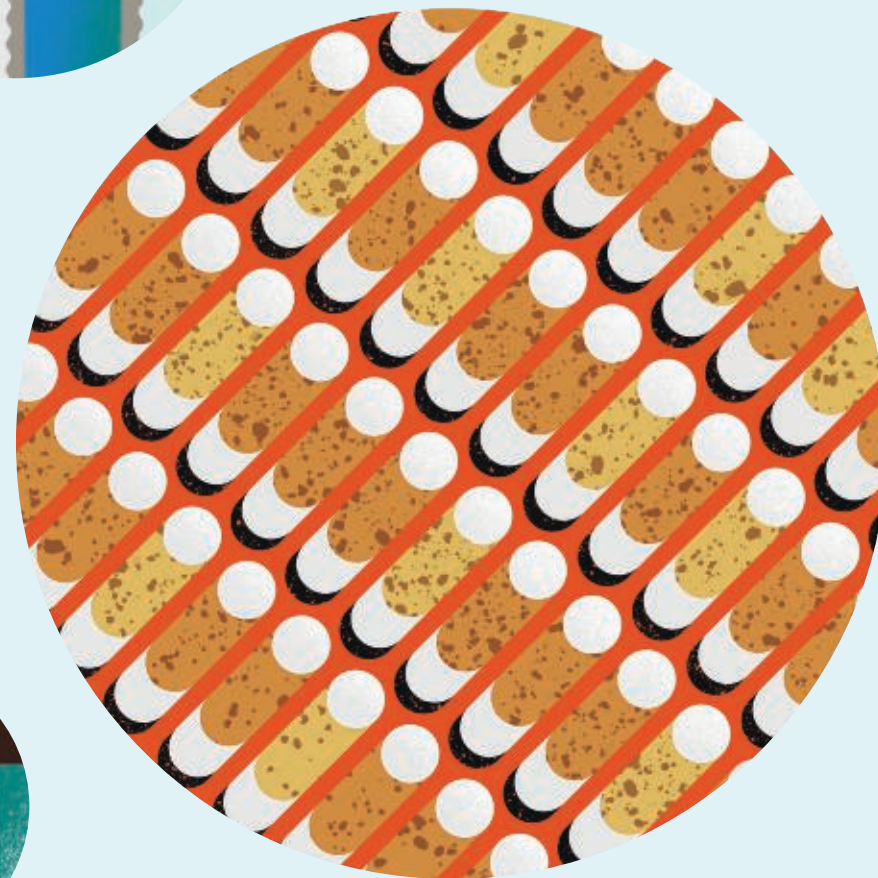


## BEVERAGE CANS: 113,719

Aluminum cans are infinitely recyclable—hang on to yours until you find the nearest bin.

## FOOD WRAPPERS: 303,586

Keep a reusable container in your bag for to-go orders.



## PLASTIC GROCERY BAGS: 89,820

Use totes at the grocery store and anywhere else you shop. The cloth drawstring bags that shoes and purses sometimes come in are a great size for produce.



## GLASS BEVERAGE BOTTLES: 88,283

Save pretty glass bottles for vases (soak off the label in soapy water). Recycle the others.



## METAL BOTTLE CAPS: 73,081

Check your recycling program for how to dispose of them.



## OTHER PLASTIC AND FOAM PACKAGING: 74,858

The online store Loop delivers products from popular brands (Häagen-Dazs, Clorox) to your door in reusable packaging.



These numbers come from Ocean Conservancy's 2018 International Coastal Cleanup (ICC). Every year, volunteers from more than 100 countries pick up garbage along beaches and waterways and record what they find so researchers can get a better sense of the waste problem, track trends, and work toward solutions. To learn how you can help with the efforts, visit [oceanconservancy.org](http://oceanconservancy.org).



ILLUSTRATION BY GIACOMO BAGNARA

## SAVE THE FOOD!

Of all the things we waste, food may be the number one area where you can make a serious impact. Here's how.

### BEFORE YOU SHOP...

Up to 40 percent of food in the United States goes to waste, and about 40 percent of that waste happens at home, per the Natural Resources Defense Council. "When food goes to waste, so do all the resources it takes to get that food on our plates, including land, energy, water, fertilizer, and labor," says Elizabeth Balkan, NRDC's food waste director. Buy only the amount of food you need to make the meals you're planning. If you can't predict on Sunday what you'll want on Thursday, that's OK: Decide on menus for the first half of the week, then give yourself flexibility to do a leftovers night, get takeout, or go on a second round of (intentional) grocery shopping. Try NRDC's planning tool, Meal Prep Mate. And don't forget to check your cabinets for items on your list you may already have.

### AT THE STORE...

"I tell my clients to shop naked," says Abby K. Cannon, a registered dietitian and sustainability expert (and lawyer!) who runs a private nutrition practice and writes the blog *Abby's Food Court*. That is, buy as few items that come "dressed" in plastic packaging as possible. Buy lettuce in a bunch instead of cut and chopped in a bag; buy a head of broccoli instead of the plastic container of chopped florets. Use bulk bins; you could even bring your own containers and ask the store to tare them for you before filling.

### WHILE UNPACKING GROCERIES...

"Chop up peppers and carrots, put them in a glass container, and then put them in the fridge," suggests Cannon. This makes cooking so much faster and easier, and makes you more jazzed about eating healthy. Remember to clean your reusable totes and put them back in the car or by the door for next time.

### WHEN YOU COOK...

Front-load the week with recipes that use the quicker-to-spoil items in your fridge, like fish or delicate greens. "The cabbage and cauliflower can wait a few more days," says Balkan. If you have picky eaters on your hands, consider dining family-style instead of giving people portions they may not finish. "Try putting a plate of vegetables in the middle of the table," says Balkan. "The kids who like the veggie will grab it, and maybe they'll influence the pickier eaters, but you won't end up with food that's been tainted and can't be saved as leftovers."

### DURING CLEANUP...

Compost anything you can't save. It's the best outcome for unusable food scraps, says Balkan. (Food put in the garbage disposal gets mixed with municipal wastewater and must be treated in an energy-intensive way.) If your town doesn't have curbside compost collection, research drop-off programs at farms, community gardens, or farmers' markets. Or consider composting in your backyard—done properly, it won't generate odors or attract pests, and your garden will love the nutrient-rich results (visit [epa.gov/compost](http://epa.gov/compost) to get started).



### USE-IT-UP RECIPES

#### Frittata

- 6 eggs
- + ¼ cup dairy
- + Leftover grains and/or cooked veggies
- + Shredded cheese and/or fresh herbs

Bake at 350°F for 20 to 30 minutes.

#### Stir-Fry

- 1 Tbsp. each chopped fresh ginger and garlic
- + 4 chopped scallions
- + Leftover rice or grains
- + Cooked chopped meat and/or veggies

Cook in 2 Tbsp. vegetable or canola oil until heated through and sizzling. Drizzle with soy sauce and toasted sesame oil.

#### Chopped Salad

- Chopped hard cheeses
- + Deli meats or salami
- + Olives or capers
- + Chopped crunchy lettuce
- + Herbs
- + Lemon juice
- + Olive oil, salt, and pepper

Toss to combine.

—Dawn Perry

## NOW LET'S CLEAN OUT YOUR CLOSET

Thanks to fast fashion, we're buying more clothes than ever and keeping them for less time. A better, money-saving approach: Extend the life of your clothes and build a wardrobe that lasts.

### Do a mindful clean-out.

"Textiles are one of the fastest-growing categories of waste in U.S. landfills," says Elizabeth Cline, author of *The Conscious Closet*. Tired of having a closet stuffed with disposable clothes you don't love? Go through your items one by one and decide what to keep and what to part with. But then take a careful look at the "toss" pile. "Ask yourself, 'What did I buy that never got worn or that wore out really quickly? What materials were uncomfortable? What brands did I buy and not wear?'" suggests Cline. Notice, too, what you kept—what brands, colors, and materials do you truly love? "Reflect on how you've been buying clothes and figure out ways to shop smarter moving forward."

### Rent or borrow.

"I always ask whether my need has to be solved by buying something," says sustainable-fashion expert Jessica Marati Radparvar, founder of the social-impact consulting firm Reconsidered. "You can shop a friend's closet for a wedding, or have a stylish friend help you style pieces in your wardrobe in different and creative ways." Services like Rent the Runway keep clothes in use as long as possible, "allowing clothes to be given a second, third, fourth life," she says.

### Pass it along.

The resale market can extend the life of your clothes once you're done with them, and you could make a little money out of it. Sites like ThredUp and, for luxury items, The RealReal will send you a bag or label to mail in your clothes and then give you cash or credit for accepted items (they recycle the rest). If you're getting rid of something out of style or in poor condition, consider textile recycling—some farmers' markets have drop-off sites, and retailers like H&M accept old items. These clothes typically get sold into the second-hand industry: Companies generally export wearable items overseas, and worn-out goods are shredded for insulation or rags, says Cline. It's considered downcycling because the value is diminished, but it's preferable to sending textiles to landfills.

### Clean and repair.

"Remove stains, sew that loose button back on—do your part to keep clothes in good condition and pass them on in good condition," says Cline. When you ensure an item will be worn longer, you minimize its impact on the environment.

### Shop with quality in mind.

Look beyond the surface level of color, print, and design, says Cline. "Hold the garment in your hands. Does the fabric feel sturdy, dense, soft, and pleasing to the touch? Then check the sewing. Turn it inside out and make sure the stitching is neat and straight, there's no unclipped threads, no broken stitches. Then check for construction details: pockets, functional buttonholes on the cuff of a blazer, a quality zipper on a coat." And consider secondhand: Buying from consignment stores, thrift shops, and resale sites is an excellent way to reduce demand for brand-new clothes. (If you're a little weirded out by used stuff, remember the amazing vintage coat you inherited from your aunt: not gross at all!)



### HOW TO HOST A CLOTHING SWAP

Invite a fun crew, put on a playlist, offer snacks, and get ready to revamp your closet. Cline offers tips.

**Keep standards high:** Tell people to bring items they'd be confident giving as gifts—no ripped or stained sweatpants, please.

**Organize it:** Sort by category—dresses, tops, pants, shoes—and by size, if you have enough items.

**Display everything:** Set items on folding tables or racks so the haul is easy to sift through. The floor or sofa will also do.

**Plan for try-ons:** Set aside a bathroom or bedroom as a changing room, and place at least one full-length mirror somewhere easy to access.

**Have a post-swap plan:** Give friends the option to take unclaimed items back. For the rest, arrange a pickup or drop-off with an organization that accepts donations.

ILLUSTRATION BY GIACOMO BAGNARA. OPPOSITE PAGE: PROP STYLING BY TIM COSTA



# WASTE NOT: AN A-TO-Z GUIDE

What to do about almost everything else you toss out

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GIACOMO BAGNARA

## A

### ANTIPERSPIRANT

New brands, like Myro, offer customizable deodorant in refillable containers (from \$10; [mymyro.com](http://mymyro.com)). Or try Tom's of Maine, which has a free TerraCycle recycling program.



## C

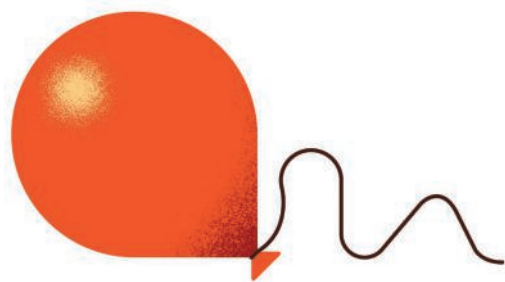
### CONTACTS

Choose two-week or one-month disposable contacts instead of dailies, and recycle the packaging. (Dispose of lenses in the garbage, never the sink or toilet.) Check out Bausch + Lomb's TerraCycle program. Wearing glasses more often is an option too, or ask your ophthalmologist if laser surgery is right for you.

## B

### BALLOONS

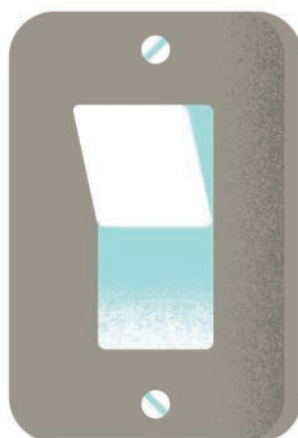
Never release helium balloons into the air, and if you have a water balloon fight, pick up and dispose of all the pieces. Broken balloons are among the most dangerous types of debris for seabirds and other animals. Better yet, opt for paper lanterns or another more earth-friendly decor.



## D

### DENTAL FLOSS

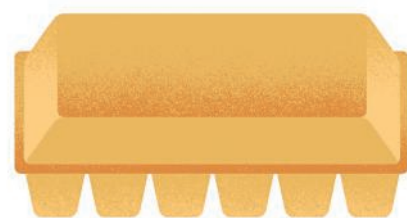
Most brands are made from nylon and come in a plastic package. Try using biodegradable silk floss in a glass package, such as Dental Lace (from \$12; [dentallace.com](http://dentallace.com))—the packaging is refillable.



## E

### ENERGY

**This is by far one of the most important resources not to waste. Ensure your home is well insulated, and practice smart energy habits: Turn off lights when you leave the room; use the least amount of heating and cooling you need; take shorter and cooler showers. The Nest Learning Thermostat (\$249; [store.google.com](http://store.google.com)) helps you avoid over-use and lets you switch off your system from your phone if you forget.**



## F

### FOAM EGG CARTONS

Buy eggs in cardboard cartons if possible—they're recyclable and compostable. Foam cartons must go into the garbage, but ask the egg vendor at your farmers' market if they take foam cartons to reuse (or if they'll refill yours with fresh eggs).



## G

### GIFT WRAP

Unwrap gifts carefully so you can reuse the paper. You can also use pretty pages from newspapers or magazines as gift wrap. Or, if you've got an overflow of tote bags, package presents in an extra tote—the eco-friendly gift that keeps on giving.

## H

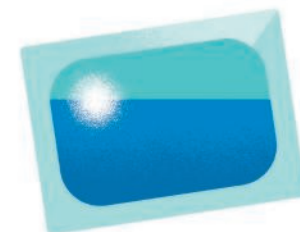
### HOME-RENOVATION SUPPLIES

Refinish and repair what you already have when possible. If you truly need to replace something, offer your old good- or salvageable-condition cabinetry, sinks, and the like on a local classifieds site, or donate to a local Habitat for Humanity ReStore. Then check those resources for salvaged replacement items that will work for your reno vision.

## J

### JUNK MAIL

Recycle the junk mail you get, but limit what comes in the first place with the PaperKarma app (\$2 per month; iOS and Android). Take a photo of the mail, enter your address, and tap Unsubscribe.



### LAUNDRY DETERGENT

Try plastic-free pods, like the ones from Dropps (from \$16; [dropps.com](http://dropps.com)), which are delivered to your home in a recyclable cardboard box. If you'd rather stick with traditional detergent, opt for a regular plastic jug (not a soft-sided, nonrecyclable pouch). Give it a good rinse when you're done and recycle.



## K

### KEYS

Metal keys can't be recycled through most curbside programs, but they can be taken to scrap-metal bins at most local recycling centers. Keys that contain plastic or a chip may need to be thrown away, but first see if your local hardware store will take them.



### RECYCLE RIGHT

Just tossing random stuff into the bin and hoping for the best? To make sure your recycling pays off, see the tips at [realsimple.com/recyclingguide](http://realsimple.com/recyclingguide).

# M



### MAKEUP

Many makeup containers can't be recycled curbside, but check TerraCycle's free programs and ask your retailer or the cosmetics company if it takes empty containers. Kiehl's, MAC, and Lush give you a reward for bringing back empties; Bond No.9 accepts any empty fragrance container.

# P



### PAPER TOWELS

Save stained and damaged clothes to cut up and use as washable rags. Switch to cloth napkins, and hang on to all those extra paper napkins that come with your takeout order for when you really need a disposable towel. If you do use a paper towel, toss it into the compost bin when you're done, unless you sprayed a chemical product on it.

# N

### NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Use newspaper for streak-free window cleaning, and place a sheet in the bottom of your compost bin for easier cleanup (soiled newspaper is compostable). Save pretty spreads for gift wrap and craft supplies, and recycle the rest.



### OATMEAL CANISTERS

Remove any plastic parts and recycle. Or save for crafting and fort-building materials.

# Q

### Q-TIPS OR OTHER COTTON SWABS

You should never insert a Q-tip in your ear—break that habit to reduce your usage and protect your ear health. If you rely on cotton swabs for makeup touch-ups, try a clean pinkie finger instead, or use reusable cotton rounds, like the ones from Wegreeco (\$11 for 16; amazon.com).

# S



### SPONGES

Try plastic-free sponges you can compost (\$6 for 3; squishful.com). Or switch to dishcloths, which you can toss into the laundry and use over and over again.

# R

### RAZORS

Most razors you find in the drugstore are plastic-heavy and made with a combo of materials that render them unrecyclable curbside. Alternatives are on the pricey side, but the investment comes up front. Laser hair removal can cost as much as \$500 per leg, but results are nearly permanent; a safety razor (like the gorgeous rose-gold version from Oui, \$75; ouishave.com) uses replacement blades that are both inexpensive (about \$1 each) and recyclable.

# T



### TO-GO CUPS

Most paper cups can't be recycled, because of the waxy lining (though you can recycle cardboard coffee sleeves and most plastic lids). So anything you can do to reduce usage is a win. Keep a reusable coffee cup in your bag and a ceramic mug at the office.

# W



### WATER

Whether or not you live in a drought-prone area, conserving water is smart for your bills and the environment. A few ideas: Take shorter showers, turn off the tap while brushing your teeth and sudsing your hands, and use the dishwasher instead of handwashing when possible (just make sure it's full). If you have a garden or indoor plants, consider unexpected sources of water—you can dump half-drunk glasses of water into the garden or even pour pasta water into a pot (instead of down the drain) to let cool and use on your plants.

# U

### UTENSILS

Carry a reusable set in your purse (Travel Utensil Set, \$15; bambuhome.com). If you end up with unwanted takeout utensils, save them for picnics and on-the-go dining.

# V

### VARIOUS PACKAGING SUPPLIES

Recycle cardboard boxes, and save bubble wrapping for future shipping needs. Air cushions can be deflated and recycled at drop-offs for plastic bags and wrap. Consider if you really need to order something online or if it could be bought and picked up from a locally owned store near you.

# X



### EXPIRED SUNSCREEN

It isn't ideal to send leftover sunscreen down the drain or toilet. Check with your local household hazardous waste facility to find out if it accepts cosmetics. If not, designate a large sealable bottle to decant all your expired liquids and gels into, and throw it away when full. Clean and recycle the other containers when possible.

# Y

### YOGURT CUPS

Yogurt isn't hard to make (find our recipe at realsimple.com/yogurt), but if you'd rather stick with store-bought, buy the biggest tub you can and portion it out into individual servings in reusable cups, rather than purchasing lots of single-serve containers.

# Z



### ZIPPER BAGS

Reuse baggies and drop off clean old ones at your grocer. Or buy a set of reusable, freezer- and dishwasher-safe food storage bags (from \$8; stasherbag.com).