

Best eco-friendly products to reduce plastic in the kitchen 2020

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At least since the arrival of Tupperware and Saran Wrap in the late 1940s, kitchens and plastic have been as inseparable as salt and pepper. Plastic is the material of choice for bottles, bags, straws, stirrers and so many other throwaway kitchen items that plastic waste is now recognized as a global environmental threat — and recycling alone likely won't curb the problem.

Plastic isn't only clogging landfills and waterways and spewing poisons when incinerated, either: Plastic product chemicals such as bisphenol A (BPA) are at the center of health debates about their potential harm, so much so that Neil MacLusky, PhD, a professor of biomedical sciences at the University of Guelph's Ontario Veterinary College, predicts that so-called "bisphenols," including BPA, "will likely be banned within five years."

In the meantime, our kitchens are one front line in the effort to reduce plastic consumption. In the middle of a coronavirus pandemic that is complicating efforts at environmental clean-up, our needs and habits as producers and consumers can make change a struggle.

Staying at home and gathering plastic

“The shocker for me since I’ve been home for the last month is the amount of film plastic,” says Judith Enck, ticking off bread bags, frozen food pouches, four-pack canned tuna wrapping and other hard-to-recycle plastics coming in via grocery runs.

Enck is a former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official and the founder of Beyond Plastics, an advocacy program based at Bennington College in Vermont. It’s her mission to advance personal choices and public policies that promote plastic-free living, and even she’s having trouble: “I am shocked at how much film plastic is in our house now,” she says.

But Enck and other champions of reusable products and reduced plastic waste tell NBC News there is still plenty that people can do to maintain a more eco-friendly home.

Should you reduce plastic use in the kitchen?

While no corner of the home is immune to plastic use, the kitchen attracts so much that zero-waste advocates recommend it as a good place to make a dent.

“There’s a lot of it, certainly, in the kitchen,” says Sarah Paiji, Shark Tank survivor and co-founder of Blueland, a New York startup for sustainable home cleaning products. “But the good news is that there has been so much focus on plastic pollution in combating climate change, that the increase in consumer demand for more plastic-free alternatives has spurred no shortage of products.”

Don’t rush to replace all your existing kitchen plastics, says Lauren Singer, who blogs about zero-waste living and founded Package Free, a marketplace for eco-friendly home products. “Don’t buy everything all at once,” says Singer. “Let the cadence of how you use a product determine what you do next. I would never recommend throwing away things that you have.”

Think of a low- or no-plastic kitchen as a long-term project. “You can’t go zero waste in a day,” says Singer. “You can’t go to zero waste in a week. You can’t go to zero waste in a month. I’ve been doing this for eight years and I’m still improving my process.”

Plastic-free products for an eco-friendly kitchen

If you do want to get a start on turning your kitchen more plastic-free, we put together some highly-rated and useful products to guide your shopping.

1. Stasher Reusable Silicone Sandwich Bag

Food-grade silicone — a rubberlike polymer made from sand — has emerged as a household favorite in post-plastic, zero-waste circles — and it boasts a seal of approval from the FDA. There are reusable silicone straws, spatulas and stretch lids, with food safety as a key selling point. Blueland's Paiji counts herself as a fan of Stasher's flexible, reusable silicone pinch-and-seal baggie. "It seals really great. It's airtight. It's freezer safe. It's microwave safe. You can boil it. You can dishwash it." Stashers have replaced plastic Ziploc baggies in her kitchen for snacks, leftovers and other items. "I use the even bigger ones to cut up fresh fruit and freeze for smoothies," says Paiji. Enck of Beyond Plastic noted the science around silicone's safety and environmental impact is ongoing.



2. Bee's Wrap 3-Pack of Food Covers

Singer of Package Free likes natural beeswax as a replacement for cling wrap and Vermont-based Bee's Wrap obliges with a trio of small, medium and large reusable wraps. Printed with a distinctive honeycomb pattern, these versatile wraps are made from GOTS-certified organic cotton, sustainably harvested beeswax, organic jojoba oil and tree resin. They're

pliable, good for use in freezers, and they seal around food by cooling down after absorbing warmth from touch. A Bee's Wrap cover is hand-washable and should last a year with proper care.



3. (re)zip 5-piece Reusable Bag Set

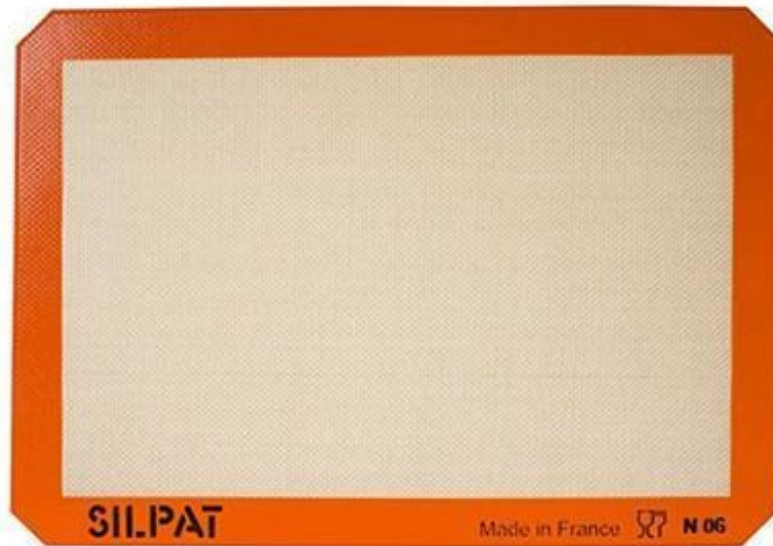
They're neither silicone nor beeswax, and they're not meant for use in microwaving or cooking, but these pinch-seal baggies from (re)zip are freezer-friendly, dishwasher-safe and BPA-free. The five bags range from 1 to 4 cups in storage capacity, and cost less than many other reusable food storage alternatives. Over the course of their life, a single set of (re)zip bags should replace hundreds of throwaway plastic bags.



(re)zip 5-piece Reusable Bag Set

4. Silpat Non-stick Silicone Baking Mat (Half Sheet)

Silpat's French-made, food-grade silicone baking tray liner comes in several sizes, from jelly roll to a three-quarter sheet. It's not a plastic replacement per se, since plastics generally don't belong in ovens, and as Enck notes, "I think most people know not to put plastic into a microwave." But the Silpat mat does cut down on the need for grease, butter, wax paper or non-stick sprays intended to keep baked goods from adhering to the tray. It's oven-safe up to 480 degrees, won't be damaged by spatulas, and is hand washable.



Silpat Non-stick Silicone Baking Mat

5. Pyrex Simply Store Glass Meal Prep Containers (18-piece)

Introduced in 1915, kitchen standby Pyrex can affordably replace your decaying plastic containers with food rounds and rectangles that should last for as long as you don't break the glass. There is some plastic involved: Simply Store pieces come with fitted plastic lids, which Pyrex says are BPA-free and microwave safe, and the glass containers are likewise billed as safe for freezer, dishwasher, and microwave.



Pyrex Simply Store Glass Meal Prep Containers (18-piece)

6. U-Konserve Stainless Steel To-Go Large Container

U-Konserve makes a variety of stainless steel food containers, and at 50 ounces, the To-Go Large will hold takeout, salads, leftovers and entrees with equal ease. The fitted lid is plastic but contains no BPA or phthalates. Stainless steel is a more expensive proposition, but Singer says it also has “a higher perceived value” than other materials for its make and durability.



7. Porter Reusable Stainless Steel Straws

Households with toddlers might prefer soft silicone for their reusable straws, but Porter's rust-proof, decorative models can also help tame the plague of throwaway plastic straws that has led to outright bans in some places and companies stopping or phasing out their use. Porter straws also come with a cleaning brush.



More shopping guides and recommendations

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Sean Piccoli is a freelance journalist in Brooklyn, New York, who has written for the New York Times and the New York Post. He is a former pop music critic for the Sun-Sentinel in South Florida, and his work has also appeared in the Miami Herald and vanityfair.com.

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