

Shopping

For a Smaller Footprint

by Nicole Olweean




We know our purchases make a difference, but navigating the consumer world with a green compass can be challenging. In this guide, you'll find some tips for reducing your environmental footprint by shifting what you buy, along with some suggestions for where to buy. **But this part is important:** don't stress. If this seems like a lot of changes, it's because it is! There's no pressure to change everything all at once. Start small, and build from there (more on this in the 'Word to the Wise' section below).



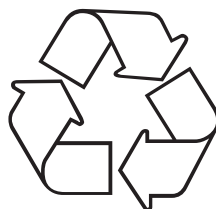
The current state of shopping

Environmental footprints from shopping tend to fall under five main categories:

1. **New materials** - Buying new things is a very normal part of everyday life. But each time a new material is made, carbon dioxide emissions and other environmental burdens are a result. For instance, making one pair of new jeans emits about 72 pounds of carbon dioxide and uses about 1000 gallons of water. Manufacturing just one new iPhone emits at least 66 pounds of carbon dioxide.
2. **Use of products that harm the environment** - Many of our favorite laundry detergents, cleaners, and backyard sprays harm the environment through water, soil, and air pollution. For example, mainstream laundry detergents, including popular brands like Tide, use phosphates to soften hard water. When this enters our waterways, it can increase the water's susceptibility to other pollutants from cars and manufacturing, and can cause those algae blooms that harm our marine life and sometimes keep us from our summertime swims.
3. **High-footprint foods** - While no one expects you to give them up entirely, foods like meat (particularly beef and lamb), dairy products, almonds, and even rice require a lot of resources to produce and emit lots of greenhouse gases (GHGs).
4. **Waste** - We're all guilty of this one. Whether it's the plastic bottle we throw away when our shampoo runs out, the chicken we don't use before it goes bad, or the appliance we leave plugged in or running when we don't need it, we all have waste in our lives. When we waste, not only do we add to landfills or pollution from incinerators, we also make it so the emissions it took to produce that item or energy were all for nothing. Take food waste: in the US alone, the EPA estimates that food waste accounts for about 170 million tons of GHG emissions annually. For scale, that's about 5.2 billion pairs of new jeans.

	<p>5. Transport - The one we hear most about! You might've heard the phrase "food miles" tossed around, or seen campaigns for buying local. This is in part because non-local items require more transportation and more emissions.</p>
 <p>The bright side</p>	<p>The good news is, eco-friendly companies and products are popping up all the time, offering new, and sometimes familiar, ways to reduce your footprint.</p> <p>But beware of greenwashing! Some companies use clever marketing to make it seem like their product is eco-friendly even if it's not.</p>
 <p>General Tips</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Look for eco certifications like Certified B Corporation, 1% For the Planet, and Climate Neutral. Check out this guide to sustainability certifications and this one to learn more. ● Wherever possible, ditch plastic packaging. Shoot for paper, or better yet, try a bulk store where you can refill old used containers with new product. ● Buy less. Take stock of what you have before adding to your collection. If shopping is a treat for you, try to think of new ways to satisfy that craving. ● Read the label. Learn a bit about the products you're choosing and possible alternatives. Once you know what to look for, it's easy to start reducing that footprint.
 <p>Budget</p>	<p>We tend to associate "green choices" with a higher price tag, and sometimes this is the case. However, as we'll see in the guide below, lower-footprint choices can often save money! Take buying from bulk food sections, for example. When you fill up your own jar or a used bag with rice or nuts, the cost per ounce will typically be cheaper AND you're ditching the packaging. Reducing your waste can also save you money. This saved cash can then be used on the green choices that might be outside of your budget.</p>

So... How to Turn the Tide?



INSTEAD OF NEW MATERIALS...

Shop second hand - Particularly for clothes and home goods, second hand shops can be a great way to meet your needs or scratch the shopping itch, without the footprint! Prefer to do some shopping

online? Websites like [ThredUP](#), [Reclaimed Fashion](#), and [others](#) feature online second-hand clothes shopping, while [ShopGoodwill](#), [Ebay](#), and [Facebook Marketplace](#) have a wide array of items for sale second-hand. Many phone and computer shops sell refurbished cell phones and laptops, and sometimes accessories like chargers too. There is a definite budget benefit to shopping second hand, as most things will be cheaper than buying new. Starting small might look like checking out second hand shops for unique birthday or holiday gifts before buying new.

Repair, don't replace - This can be tough, as some companies intentionally make their products difficult or impossible to repair to encourage new purchases. However, there are often resources online and in the community that can help. Online, YouTube can be a great source of how-to videos. Local computer/tech shops, music shops, tailors, carpenters, and shoe repairers can repair a wide range of everyday or specialty items. Starting small might look like taking your favorite boots to a shoe repair shop when the sole wears through, rather than buying a new pair. Bonus: new life for your favorite boots!

Buy less - This is easier said than done, but the best way to reduce your consumption of new materials is to simply reduce your consumption. Starting small might look like choosing a day at the movies or enjoying a service like a massage instead of a day of shopping, or choosing not to upgrade an item that is still functioning well for you.



INSTEAD OF USING PRODUCTS THAT HARM THE ENVIRONMENT...

Find alternatives to buy for everyday household needs - Starting small might look like trying out an eco-friendly laundry detergent next time you run out. Shampoo/conditioner, dish soap, household cleaners, laundry detergent, deodorant, toothpaste, sunscreen – these are a few of the products you'll find at the sites below, made with earth-friendly recipes:

[ETEE](#)

[EARTH HERO](#)

[ZERO WASTE CARTEL](#)

In Kalamazoo, we're lucky enough to have **Bee Joyful**, a shop specializing in zero-waste and eco-friendly products. Visit the brick-and-mortar at 243 S. Kalamazoo Mall and the website [here](#).

Eco-friendly alternatives can also sometimes be found at the big-box stores. But read carefully – these stores are more likely to contain greenwashed products.

Find alternatives to make for everyday household needs - Some things can be taken care of with a simple homemade remedy. For example, starting small might look like keeping a bottle of diluted white vinegar around instead of your go-to surface cleaner. It will work like a charm, reduce your footprint, and save you money. Need to off some weeds? Try [this list](#) of natural ways to get rid of them. Before resorting to sprays or treatments in the garden, Google natural remedies for your pest. Here's [one example](#) of a helpful list you might find.



INSTEAD OF PRIORITIZING HIGH-FOOTPRINT FOODS...

Eat less meat - We hate to hear it, but it's just true: the meat and dairy industries are two of the leading GHG emitters in the world today, producing about 14% of annual global emissions. This doesn't mean you need to scrap the steak & cheese altogether, but eating less can really make a difference. Reducing your meat intake by just one or two days per week is a good way to start small. Plus, eating less meat usually makes us healthier, and there's a whole world of plant-based meat alternatives out there for those off-day cravings – try [Beyond Meat](#) products, [Impossible](#) products, tofu, tempeh, and seitan. On other days, try vegan cheeses, yogurts, and milk replacement drinks like oat milk (but beware of almond milk products, which have a very high water use footprint!). Local shops like Hardings, Fresh Thyme, People's Food Coop, Earth Fare, Target, Meijer, Trader Joe's, Wal-Mart, and Aldi will carry some or all of these products. Or, just omit the meat or dairy and make it a regular ol' veggie meal, like veggie chili, veggie stir-fry, or veggie pizza!

Eat a variety of grains - For many of us, rice is our go-to grain. It's familiar, versatile, and supplements many of our favorite dishes, from curry to fried rice to stews. But rice has an environmental footprint that is close to lower-impact meats like fish and chicken, making it the grain with the highest footprint. If you eat a lot of rice, try replacing it once in a while with quinoa, bulgar wheat, barley, or farro. Hint: check the bulk section for ideas! Starting small might mean getting a single serving of farro from the bulk section to try it out.

Avoid the almonds - Almonds have a much higher environmental footprint than other nuts, so try replacing them with cashews, walnuts, pecans, or hazelnuts. Or go with peanuts, a legume that helps improve soil health! Starting small might look like choosing breakfast cereals without almonds, or hazelnut, sunflower, peanut or cashew butter instead of almond butter.

Eat Seasonally, when possible - In Michigan, eating a truly seasonal diet would make winter even more miserable, but when possible, choose fruits and veggies that are in season. Starting small might mean taking a break from strawberries during the winter, or holding off on the asparagus and stone fruits until they're back in season. Not only does this help with the footprint, it can make certain times of the year extra exciting!



REDUCE WASTE BY...

Buying from bulk food suppliers or refill shops - Some shops, like Kalamazoo's Fresh Thyme, offer bulk sections where foods can be purchased using your own receptacle in the amount you need. Not sure what to do with that leftover pasta sauce jar? Wash it well and use it to buy your next batch of lentils or AP flour. Only need a handful of oats for your recipe? Take as much or as little as you like from the bulk section. These sections will normally include a variety of foods, from flours, beans, raw nuts, sugars, grains, and seeds to granola, flavored nuts, candies, and coffee beans. Starting small could mean choosing one item you normally buy in a package and buying it in the bulk section instead!

Here are a few shops to keep on your radar: [Fresh Thyme](#), [Sawall](#), and [People's Food Coop](#) for groceries; [Chocolatea](#) for loose-leaf teas; and [Spice Merchants](#) in the Grand Rapids Downtown Market for spices. For non-food products like soaps, shampoos, cleaners, etc., visit [Bee Joyful](#) in the Kalamazoo Mall.

Avoiding plastic packaging when possible - Many of the online shops above that sell household products also sell plastic-replacement products. For example, [ETEE](#) sells bamboo toothbrushes, non-plastic, reusable food wraps and lunch bags, paper towel alternatives, cleaning utensils, toothpaste & deodorant in jars, reusable straws, lip balm in cardboard packaging, shampoo and conditioner bars, and more – all of which eliminate either plastics or single-use items. [Earth Hero](#) and [Zero Waste Cartel](#) offer similar products, including dryer balls to replace your dryer sheets, reusable produce bags, and sunscreen in a tin. Start small here by replacing dryer sheets with dryer balls – they tend to work better, and you can add your choice of essential oils to smell up your laundry the way you like!

Using what you have first - Especially when it comes to waste, throwing away our current cleaning products or deodorant and switching to a more eco-friendly version isn't going to do much good in reducing your footprint. Finish up what you've got, or keep those products around for serious clean jobs that might require a heavier chemical.

Turning off appliances when not in use - Once we buy things, how we use them matters. Start small by putting your computer to sleep when not in use, using a smart thermostat, or unplugging devices that are not in use. These things can all reduce energy waste – and our energy bills!



CUT YOUR TRANSPORT FOOTPRINT BY...

Buying local - It's true: buying local does cut emissions from transport. But it's also good for the economy because it stimulates growth for small, independently-owned farms and businesses, which tends to keep money flowing throughout the community. For local foods, check out [this wonderful list](#) of farmers' markets, butchers, bakeries, farms, and restaurants with groceries in Kalamazoo County. Start small by choosing local food, or by visiting your local tech shop for your next tech purchase rather than choosing a big box store.

Buying less - much like avoiding new materials, simply buying less is the best way to reduce your transport footprint! To start small, if you feel like you need to freshen things up a bit, try downsizing or rearranging instead of buying to scratch the itch!

A Word to the Wise

Now that you have a list of 'do's and don'ts' for greener shopping, here's one last 'don't': don't pressure yourself to change everything all at once. Remember the Start Small Rule: maybe Meatless Mondays is a good way to start. Or maybe start with the bathroom, and as you run out of your toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, etc., simply replace them with a new version. When you've finished the bathroom, move on to the next room. Maybe teaming up with a friend or family member to make changes together will help make transitions smooth and fun.

Changing our environmental impact takes time and can be difficult, especially when we're used to doing things a certain way. But, don't forget: it can be fun, creative, and communal too! Together, we can make changes that will have lasting impacts for ourselves, our planet, and future generations.



