

## Recycling plastic sandwich bags and wrap

Written by EarthTalk® From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine.  
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**Dear EarthTalk:** *Where do you recycle plastic stuff like sandwich bags, Saran wrap and plastic grocery store wrappers? Can they just go in with other plastics in the recycling bin? There never seems to be any information available about this.* -- Renee La-Fontaine, Lake Hughes, CA

The reason you don't hear much about recycling these types of plastic films is that most municipalities don't take back items intended to wrap food. One exception may be sandwich bags, which are made from easy-to-recycle polyethylene, as long as any hard (i.e. "Ziploc") components are removed and they are rinsed free of any food debris or stains.

For that matter, if you are going to the trouble to wash them, you may as well dry and reuse them at home a few times before relegating them to the recycling bin. There are even small countertop racks available for hanging plastic bags to dry before reusing them.

Clinging plastic like Saran wrap is problematic for recyclers because the resin that it contains (to give it wrapping power) cannot be re-extracted without massive amounts of energy—more than it takes to make it new from scratch. And given that it's usually soiled with some kind of food, used plastic wrap should always just go right into the trash.

Other non-recyclable plastic films include dark-colored plastic bags, bags with handles or drawstrings, and anything else designed to be wrapped around food. Since you can't even rinse or recycle these kinds of plastics, it's better to avoid them altogether and invest in some reusable containers to store leftovers.

Another option is to use plastic grocery store shopping bags (though they are increasingly being phased out) to wrap your food leftovers in. Many municipalities and most stores that provide such bags accept them for recycling, so once you're done with them they can be recycled or returned to the store, after which they can be melted down and incorporated into weather- and

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rot-resistant window and door frames, decking (such as Trex), palettes, pipes and other long-lasting hard goods. Like with sandwich and other bags you intend to recycle, make sure plastic grocery bags are clean before you turn them in for recycling.

If you are a Ziploc bag or plastic wrap fanatic but want to do the right thing by the environment, look for plastic food storage film or bags made from biodegradable polymers. Some popular brand names to keep an eye out for at Whole Foods and elsewhere are Eco Wrap, EcoFlex and BioBag. These plastics—some of which are made from agricultural scraps left over from corn crops—can go right in with yard waste or other compostables and will break down over time accordingly just like cardboard or food scraps. With time major brands will undoubtedly be offering similar products.

But even though there may in fact be “greener” plastic out there, reducing our reliance on disposable bags altogether should be the ultimate goal. Luckily many grocery chains are hip to greening their own operations and image, and are giving away or selling for a nominal amount reusable canvas shopping bags so customers don't have to choose between wasting plastic and paper at the checkout line.

### CONTACTS:

UNFCCC, [www.unfccc.int](http://www.unfccc.int);

Worldwatch Institute, [www.worldwatch.org](http://www.worldwatch.org).

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