How to Live an Eco-Friendly Lifestyle

by Wendy Wisner
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It is increasingly clear that climate change is the defining issue of our time.

Although scientists don’t agree on exactly how long it will take¹, there is a consensus that the environment and possibly our very lives are in danger. Moreover, according to NASA², there is a 95% probability that human activity is to blame for the rise in global temperature we’ve seen over the past few decades.

Certainly changes need to be made on a societal level, but the onus is on every one of us to make conscious choices toward more eco-friendly lifestyles. It can feel overwhelming to consider what this might entail. Many of us feel stretched thin as it is — how can we possibly find the bandwidth to make substantial lifestyle changes? Plus, so many environmentally hazardous aspects of modern living feel out of our control. It’s not as though we can ditch our gas-guzzling cars on a whim, or stop purchasing any and all products made with non-sustainable materials.

Change is hard, but you don’t have to do this all at once. Every effort you make toward a more eco-friendly lifestyle counts, and even a few small changes can really add up. It’s best to take a transformation like this gradually, which is why we’ve prepared a step-by-step guide.

You can read each section in order…or completely out of order. Pick a few action items that feel doable, and go from there.

¹ https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/2182663/climate-change-how-long-do-we-really-have-save
² https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/

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Reducing Waste

Almost all of us feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stuff that clutters our lives. Even if we make an effort to limit consumption, the very nature of our lifestyle makes it difficult to succeed. For example, if you are a busy working adult, you are going to find yourself grabbing your coffee or lunch on the go — and you don’t have much choice in how your convenience food is packaged.

The same goes for so many needed purchases we make: from how our clothes, toiletries, and groceries are made and packaged, to how our electricity is delivered. Even the most conservative spender makes impulse purchases every now and then. When these items go unused, they get crammed into every nook and cranny of our homes, or else they get tossed in the trash, where they add to our landfills.

If you look at the statistics, it’s pretty alarming how much unnecessary waste we consume.

According to the most recent statistics from the EPA, the average American produces 4.48 pounds of trash per day. With approximately 328 million people living in the United States, that amounts to about 734,000 tons of trash — again, this is every single day. That’s enough to fill about 62,000 garbage trucks!

Some people have seen these stats and felt a pull to do everything in their power to reduce waste. Take Bea Johnson, author of Zero Waste Home, who stumbled on the “zero waste” lifestyle in 2006 after needing to move her family of four into a rental apartment for a year and put 80% of their belongings in storage. Once Johnson saw how little “stuff” her family needed to thrive and be happy, she made some intentional lifestyle changes and was able to quite significantly reduce waste.

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4 https://www.census.gov/popclock/
6 https://zerowastehome.com/
Here are Johnson’s 5 “R’s” for reducing waste⁷.

Although not all of us are ready to go “zero waste,” these tips are simple, easy to follow, and a fantastic way to begin a journey toward waste reduction:

1. **Refuse:** Start saying no to unnecessary things like promotional freebies, junk mail, plastic bags, and straws.

2. **Reduce:** Let go of anything you don’t actually use or need; declutter your home and donate/upcycle any items you are done with.

3. **Reuse:** Almost every disposable item we use can be replaced by something reusable (ex., use tote bags instead of plastic grocery bags, cloth instead of paper towels).

4. **Recycle:** Reduce or avoid using materials that are not recyclable.

5. **Rotting:** Begin composting any eligible waste.

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**Action Item:**

Pick one of the 5 R’s that feels most feasible to you. Write down three things you can do in the next week to address it, and go from there.

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Food Storage

You’ve just cooked a fab dinner, happily stuffed yourself to the max… and now comes the least appealing part of the cooking process: cleaning up and putting away those leftovers. Most of us choose the path of least resistance when it comes to packing and storing our food. We reach for whatever clean Tupperware we can find. Or we put the leftovers away in Saran wrap, aluminum foil, or one of those roomy plastic freezer bags.

Unfortunately, all of the above are pretty awful for the environment. Take plastic, for example, which is what the majority of commercially available food storage containers are made of. According to research published in Science Advances, humans consumed 6.3 billion metric tons of plastic in 2015, but only 9% was recycled. Roughly 12% was incinerated, and the rest — a whopping 79% — collected in landfills or in the natural environment.

There are also serious health concerns about plastic packaging leaching toxins into our foods. And this issue goes beyond BPA, which most of us already know is harmful. Phthalates, perfluoroalkyl chemicals [PFCs], and perchlorates — all found in food packaging — are also of concern.

So what are the other possibilities here? The good news is that finding and using alternative food packaging isn’t rocket science, and there are a lot of options out there for you to consider. Here are eight simple ideas to get you started:

1. **Repurposed Glass Containers**: Clean out that spaghetti sauce jar, pickle jar, or jam jar and reuse it to store your food.

2. **Glass Food Storage Containers**: There are a ton of affordable glass jar products on the market. They are more durable than plastic and easier to clean.

3. **Stainless Steel Food Containers**: These are more lightweight than glass. Many come with dividers, a great option for packing lunches. products on the market. They are more durable than plastic and easier to clean.
4. **Mesh Bags**: Breathable mesh bags are a great way to store your fruits and veggies.

5. **Reusable Food Bags**: Ziploc bags are super convenient, but there are many cloth alternatives out there — some have fab designs and are fun to use.

   Planet Wise⁹ makes some really cute snack and sandwich bags. And if you are looking for more durable food storage bags, check out the leak-proof silicone bags from Dwelling With Pride¹⁰.

5. **Biodegradable Wax Paper**: Saran wrap isn’t your only option. Swap it out for wax paper (soy-based ones are biodegradable).

6. **Paper Bags**: The classic brown paper bag can be used to store all kinds of stuff, including leftover bread, snacks, and even dried beans and pasta.

7. **Fabric Bowl Covers**: Use the bowls you already own and turn them into storage containers by popping a fitted fabric bowl cover over them and storing them in the fridge. Easy peasy. There are several fabric bowl covers on the market, including some festive ones from Earth Bunny¹¹. Or, if you’re feeling crafty, you can make them yourself — try a DIY tutorial online, like the one from Hearth and Vine¹².

8. **Beeswax Paper**: Beeswax paper is an exciting new-ish food storage alternative. Use it to wrap up a sandwich, a half-used avocado, fruits, veggies, or a block of cheese. The best part is that beeswax paper is washable, reusable, and compostable.

**Action Item:**

Pick one food storage alternative from the list and give it a go for a week. If that goes well, try a different one for a week, and so on.

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¹⁰ [https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07JDXB62H/ref=psdc_3744031_t2_B07DK41XBT](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07JDXB62H/ref=psdc_3744031_t2_B07DK41XBT)

¹¹ [https://www.amazon.com/Earth-Bunny-Fabric-Bowl-Covers/dp/B015F41T0U](https://www.amazon.com/Earth-Bunny-Fabric-Bowl-Covers/dp/B015F41T0U)


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Food Shopping

Think for a second about what a typical trip to the grocery store looks like. Unless you walk, ride your bike or take public transportation, most grocery store jaunts involve driving a few miles to get there. Then you spend an hour or so tossing produce into plastic bags, filling your cart with pre-packaged foods, loading plastic grocery bags with your stuff, packing everything in the car, and heading home.

Not exactly environmentally friendly, right? Not only that, but all the food, packaging, and plastic bags you consumed had to be manufactured — often with less-than-sustainable practices — and shipped across many miles in carbon-emitting vehicles.

Of course, some people are more ahead of the curve when it comes to sustainable grocery shopping — and many awesome companies out there are, too. But we could all probably use a few pointers when it comes to making our grocery store trips a little kinder to Mother Earth.

Here are some tips:

1. Bring Reusable Grocery Bags To The Store: Our plastic bag consumption in this country is through the roof, and the majority of plastic bags are not biodegradable. Taking your own reusable grocery bag to the store is a simple way to do your part. Not only that, reusable bags hold a lot more at once, are easier to carry, and reduce clutter in your home.

2. Skip The Plastic Fruit And Veggie Bags: Tossing each and every fruit and veggie you purchase into its own plastic baggie can become very wasteful very quickly. Either store a few items at once in one bag, or bring your own reusable mesh bags to the store.

3. Shop Locally: Shopping locally reduces pollution from transportation vehicles. It ensures that your food is fresh and will stay fresh for longer. And it’s a great way to support your local economy.
4. **Buy In Bulk:** Purchasing your groceries in bulk can not only save you money, but bulk items often come with less packaging and fewer wasteful materials.

5. **Check Packaging Labels:** Your food packaging may look similar from the outside, but not all packaging materials are created equal. Look for labels that indicate if the packaging is recyclable. Consider sticking with plastics that are labeled #1 (PET or PETE) or #2 (HDPE) because these materials are most likely to be recyclable.

6. **Consolidate Your Shopping Trips:** Making several small shopping trips per week lends itself to more impulse buying. You are likely to end up with more food than you need, and you’ll probably end up tossing most of it. A carefully planned weekly or bi-monthly grocery store trip will help you keep your waste to a minimum — plus, you’ll use your car less, which is also more environmentally sound.

7. **Choose Stores That Practice Sustainability:** From what materials are used for packaging, to what machinery is used in manufacturing — and even how stores process their waste material — there are many ways that a food company can do their part to be eco-friendly. If the store you frequent doesn’t have this information readily available, consider doing a little digging of your own to find out if they are worth supporting.

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**Action Item:**

Next time you go to the grocery store, take note of all the unsustainable products and practices you see. Pick 1 or 2 items from the above list to implement before your next grocery store visit.
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Sustainable Products

These days, there are a lot of exciting developments in the eco-friendly/sustainability realm. More businesses are getting the message that “going green” is not just an option but a necessity, and have begun manufacturing their products using more sustainable materials and manufacturing methods. Cities and even entire states are taking measures to protect the environment such as placing bans on plastic bags and straws.

These changes are great news for a consumer aiming for a more eco-friendly lifestyle, yet all the sustainable labels and product descriptions can be confusing. How do you know for sure if a product you want to purchase is really sustainable, or if a company is tacking on a “green-friendly” label to entice you to purchase their product?

It’s always wise to do a little vetting of a company to see if they truly practice what they preach, but there is a pretty good consensus out there about what eco-friendly product labels and descriptions mean. Here’s a cheat sheet to get you started.

1. **Biodegradable:** Simply put, something is considered biodegradable if it can break down into its smallest possible natural elements in a reasonable amount of time and not cause significant harm to the earth. For example, it only takes paper 2-5 months to biodegrade, but plastic takes hundreds or thousands of years to biodegrade.

2. **Vegan-friendly:** This term generally means that a product was made with the use of little or no animal products. Vegan products minimize cruelty to animals but aren’t necessarily eco-friendly. For example, common leather substitutes like vinyl are often made of toxic ingredients.

3. **Sugarcane Plastic:** Sugarcane plastic is a popular plant-based plastic alternative, or bioplastic. Most plastics are made of petroleum, but bioplastics are made from plant or other biological material. Bioplastics are manufactured with fewer carbon emissions than petroleum-based plastics and contain fewer harmful chemicals like BPA.
4. **Fair Trade:** There isn’t one official institution that declares a product to be “Fair Trade.” If you look for the “Fair Trade” label at your local store, you’ll notice that different products have different labels, from organizations such as Fairtrade International, Equal Exchange, and Fair Trade USA. However, no matter where the label comes from, you can generally be assured that if something is labeled “Fair Trade” or “Fair Trade Certified,” that product adhered to certain standards in terms of fair and safe working conditions, as well as environmentally-friendly manufacturing techniques.

5. **Organic:** In the U.S., the USDA is the organization that regulates organic products. Products without USDA labels may be made with fewer or no pesticides, but there is no way to guarantee that. USDA organic foods and products must be manufactured according to agricultural standards issues by the USDA.

6. **Tree-free:** Billions of trees are cut down each year to produce the majority of our paper products. Tree-free products are made from alternative sources, most commonly bamboo grass and sugarcane.

7. **Made From Post-Consumer Recycled Material:** This is any product that is repurposed from consumer waste material. An example of this would be a newspaper that was recycled to make more newspapers.

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**Action Item:**

Go through your recently purchased toiletries and paper goods, scanning labels. Do any of these products use “green friendly” ingredients or practice eco-friendly manufacturing? You might be surprised by which products do and which do not.
Recycling

You’ve probably heard about the importance of recycling since you were a kid, and you likely follow your town or city’s recycling regulations to the best of your ability. But what is recycling exactly and how does it benefit the environment? Most importantly, are you doing it correctly?

As defined by the EPA, recycling is the act of collecting and processing waste materials that would otherwise be dumped into landfills and turning them into new products. Most of what we think of as recycling is “downcycling,” the process where a product is broken down into raw materials and then used to produce a new product, often of slightly lesser value (upcycling, covered next, is when people or companies repurpose products for increased value).

There is strong, indisputable evidence regarding the environmental benefits of recycling.

Although recycling non-biodegradable products like plastics should be a top priority (it can take some plastic bottles thousands of years to biodegrade!), anything that should be recycled most definitely should.

That raises the question:

What can I recycle, and what can’t I? This is an area that can get a little confusing. Different locales have varying recycling rules, so it’s best to check with your local sanitation department for a list. Still, here are some guidelines that are fairly universal.

For example, recycling:

- Reduces the amount of waste filling landfills and incinerators
- Conserves our natural resources
- Curbs pollution by reducing the need to obtain new raw materials
- Saves manufacturing energy and resources

https://www.epa.gov/recycle/recycling-basics
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## Recycling Guidelines

### You Can Recycle:

- Most rigid plastic bottles
- Most plastic food containers
- Cereal and snack cardboard boxes
- Books, magazines and mail
- Printer paper, cardboard, newspaper
- Tin, aluminum, and steel cans
- Glass jars, containers and bottles

### You Can’t Recycle:

(limit your consumption of these and/or use reusable alternatives!)

- Plastic shopping bags
- Plastic wrap (like Saran wrap)
- Plastic Utensils
- Styrofoam products
- Take-out containers made of styrofoam or that contain non-recyclable plastics (check your local regulations regarding what numbered plastics can be recycled).
- Bubble Wrap
- Tissues/paper napkins/paper towels
- Any food containers or toiletry bottles that have not been rinsed out

### Action Item:

Brainstorm a list of non-recyclable items that you purchase on a regular basis. Can you reduce your consumption of at least a few of these?
Upcycling — taking a used product and repurposing it into a brand-new product, often of increased value — is an exciting way to recycle your stuff, and help save the planet in the process. The environmental advantages of upcycling are similar to the benefits of recycling in general: reduced waste, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. Upcycling your own stuff is a great way to get your creative juices flowing and save a few bucks.

You can scour the internet for DIY upcycling projects that run the gamut from easy to highly skilled. You may have upcycled without even realizing it, like those times you used a cleaned-out sauce jar or mason jar as a coin receptacle or flower vase. Or maybe you’ve been craftier at times with your trash — taking an old window frame, painting it and hanging it in your living room.

Many eco-friendly companies are starting to produce their own upcycled products. Think picture frames made of bike chains, napkin rings fashioned from bent silverware or a laptop case crafted from upcycled denim. Some of these products tend to run on the pricier side, but purchasing them is a good way to support environmentally conscious businesses, and a lot of the products are one-of-a-kind and eclectic.

If you don’t want to create your own upcycled stuff or purchase upcycled products, you can get into the upcycling groove by donating your stuff to be upcycled through a company called TerraCycle.

Action Item:
Think back to a time you unknowingly did some upcycling yourself. That might just give you the inspiration to upcycle something new, or browse through the many super-fun upcycling projects on the web.
Composting

Throwing perfectly good food away always feels so wasteful, doesn’t it? According to the EPA, 30% of what we throw away consists of food scraps and yard waste, both of which can be composted. When those items inhabit our landfills, they not only take up space, but produce harmful greenhouse gases\(^\text{14}\).

In a nutshell, composting means taking organic matter, and —rather than trashing it — turning it into a beneficial soil conditioner called humus. Humus produced by composting helps soil maintain moisture, reduces the need for pollutants and fertilizers, and enhances the production of the kind of bacteria and fungi that breaks soil down into more nutrient-rich material.

For food scraps to be turned into compost, four elements have to be present: 1) The food scraps themselves; 2) Dead leaves, branches, and twigs; 3) Water; 4) The ability to maintain a temperature of about 120-170 degrees for your compost heap\(^\text{15}\).

There are so many things you can compost. Dairy products, meat, grease and oil are some of the few food and substances that usually can’t be composted. However, using properly insulated containers\(^\text{16}\) or purchasing special equipment (like a Bokashi Bucket\(^\text{17}\)) may allow you to compost these items as well.

**Here are some of the most common items that can be composted:**

- Fruits and Veggies
- Coffee grounds
- Used tea bags
- Egg shells
- Nut shells
- Cardboard / Paper
- Yard trimmings
- Houseplants
- Leaves
- Dryer and vacuum cleaner lint
- Hair and Fur

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\(^{14}\) [https://www.epa.gov/recycle/composting-home]

\(^{15}\) [https://www.permaculture.co.uk/readers-solutions/how-make-hot-compost]

\(^{16}\) [https://www.cleanairgardening.com/how-to-compost-meat/]

\(^{17}\) [https://thebokashibucket.com/]

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When first presented with the idea of composting, many of us think “Ewwwwwww!” But getting up close and personal with dirt and worms isn’t the only way to do it (although some folks actually enjoy that aspect!). Here’s how to get started with composting:

1. **Outside Composting**
   - You can compost in your backyard by selecting a shady place for your compost
   - Add your food scraps and leaves/branches/twigs as they are ready, continuing to alternate between the two
   - Add enough water to moisten materials, and add manure or any nitrogen source
   - Cover to keep moisture in, and toss the mixture periodically
   - You will know your compost is ready when the bottom of your pile is dark in color, which takes several months

2. **Indoor Composting**
   You don’t have to have a backyard to compost! In fact, many cities (like New York, Seattle, Portland and San Francisco) have compost collection services as part of their sanitation departments. If not, your town, city, community, or even apartment complex might offer composting options (check with your local sanitation department for ideas).

Indoor composting usually involves purchasing a specialized composting bin from the hardware or garden store. Some of the most popular and best selling indoor bins include The Utopia Kitchen Compost Bin and the OXO Good Grips Easy Clean Compost Bin. But also you can make one yourself by purchasing any bin and making sure it is well insulated. A smartly set up and well-tended indoor compost bin should not attract bugs and rodents or smell foul. Indoor compost bins hold less stuff than outdoor ones do, and tend to be ready in just a few weeks.

**Action Item:**

Go through your day, noting all the food products you trash that are actually compostable. You might be surprised just how many there are!
Conserving Energy

You can’t really live a normal modern life without consuming a pretty substantial amount of energy. Energy is what heats our homes, powers our lights and appliances, charges our phones and laptops, and fuels our cars. The problem is that the most widely used forms of energy — coal, petroleum and natural gas — contribute significantly to greenhouse emissions.

Not only that, but many of these resources are non-renewable. Experts warn that, if we continue consuming them at the current rate, we could run out of them within the next 100 years.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, the U.S. alone consumes about one fourth of the world’s energy, which is quite alarming since we only constitute 4% of the world’s population. This means it’s on each and every one of us to make an effort to conserve energy.

Obviously, not all of us can afford to go out and buy a hybrid car, nor do we all own homes where we can install solar panels (though each of these are totally awesome things to do if you are able!). But there are so many simple and inexpensive things we can all do to conserve energy. Ready to dive in?

1. Drive less
   - Next time you need to take a trip a few streets away to pick up some things up from the store, go on foot — you’ll get some exercise too!
   - Car pool when you can
   - Group your errands together so you make fewer trips
   - Use public transportation whenever possible
2. **Weatherize Your Home:**
- Use weatherstrips to seal up your windows, door frames or anyplace in your home where heat escapes
- Set your thermostat to the lowest possible temperature (stock up on blankets and sweaters!)
- Install a “smart” thermostat that will adjust your home’s temperature without you having to give it a moment’s thought
- Consider installing more weather-efficient windows
- During the summer keep the shades down when you leave the house so the house doesn’t get too hot; this also helps lock in heat during winter

3. **Ration Everyday Energy Use:**
- Unplug appliances when not in use
- Replace older appliances with energy savers
- Use LED lightbulbs that conserve energy
- As your mother always told you, “Turn off the darn lights!”
- Only use an air conditioner when you need to; don’t get in the habit of using it daily all summer
- Use the microwave or toaster oven to cook or reheat food; stoves use much more energy
- Take shorter or colder showers to reduce heat usage
- Adjust your refrigerator settings periodically; keep them on the lowest settings possible
Action Item:

Throughout your day, notice the forms of electricity you use in your home, and how many times you use them. Just becoming more mindful will likely cause you to make some reductions in your home energy use. Of course, you will also likely see a reduction in your electric bills, which is always a nice added bonus.
Conserving Water

Over 70% of the earth is covered in water, which might lead some to think that there’s plenty of water for the taking, and that water isn’t something we need to conserve. The problem is that, according to the U.S. Department of Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation, only about 3% of that water is fresh water and just 0.5% can be consumed by humans. What’s more, 2.5% of the earth’s fresh water is not available — it’s either stuck in glaciers, polar caps, atmosphere or soil. And some of that water is polluted.

Water conservation is important to the earth’s future as well as our own, especially as pollution intensifies, population increases, and we witness more droughts and water shortages. Reducing water use helps keep our parks and wilderness green and thriving, our animals fed, our ocean life stable, and our lakes and oceans full and swimmable. Don’t forget that we also need water to fight fires, grow fruits and vegetables, and keep our streets and homes clean.

There are so many things you can do to conserve water at home and in your daily life — as well as some bigger changes you can make in terms of how you use and process water at home. Let’s start with the easiest action ones first.

8 Easy and FREE Ways to Conserve Water

1. Take shorter showers and less frequent baths
2. Turn off the sink in between teeth brushing, shaving, face washing, and dish washing
3. Fix any leaky faucets or pipes in your home
4. Switch to low-flow showerheads
5. Only water your lawn or use lawn sprinklers when necessary
6. Bring your own bottled water
7. Only run the dishwasher or washing machine when it’s full
8. In warm weather, line-dry your clothes outside
Get in the Habit of Using Greywater

When you think about it, we often discard perfectly good water for almost no reason at all. Certainly sewage water should not be reused, but the water that ran down the sink with your dishes or down the drain during your shower — surely that can be put to good use.

Enter greywater. Greywater is any relatively clean waste water you generate at home. Here’s how to collect it and re-use it:

- First, you need to make sure that the soaps and other substances you put down the drain are greywater-friendly. Bleach or other toxic substances are a clear no. You can look for the “greywater friendly” label on your cleaners and toiletries.

- Talk to your water authority or plumber about setting up your washing machine, dryer, or dishwasher to divert any excess water to a container or irrigation system.

- Keep a bucket nearby to collect any extra running water you use (i.e., when you are waiting for the shower, bath, or sink to reach optimal temperature). Also keep a receptacle nearby to collect other discarded water from food, drinks, and cooking.

- Use any of this collected greywater to water your lawn or plants. This water can also be used to flush the toilet or refill your hot water heater.

Action Tip:
Spend a day this week thinking about water. Write down each time you used it, what it was for, and whether any of it was wasted. Were you surprised by just how much water you use throughout the day?
Sustainable Retail and Fashion

What were the last two or three fashion or retail purchases you made? Do you know where each item was manufactured, and by whom? What manufacturing methods were employed and what materials were used? What about the founders of the company — what are their ethical standards, and what current and future goals do they have for “going green”?

It’s OK if none of these things crossed your mind as you brought that cute pair of boots, or slurped that last cup of coffee. But it’s a good idea to start thinking about these things, because — barring any serious economic hardships — most of us have at least some choice in what products we consume and what companies we endorse with our dollars.

Unfortunately, when it comes to retail and fashion, it can be difficult to find out what eco-friendly practices a company employs. There are certainly companies that advertise these things outright, but many do not, especially larger companies. So how can you start getting some real facts about these companies’ practices?

1. Investigate The Founders and Executives.
You can start by finding out the names of the founders and executives in the company. Then do some research on them. What kinds of causes do they endorse? Do they have any history of unfair labor practices, or accusations of unethical manufacturing methods?

2. Look Online For Company Reviews
Obviously the company isn’t going to include unfavorable reviews on their website, and will probably try to bury any negativity elsewhere if they can. But social media and the internet have a way of unearthing certain truths no matter what. Check the Better Business Bureau, Reddit, Yelp, Google Reviews and Facebook business reviews.
3. Do A Deep Dive Into The Company’s Website.

Does the company list their manufacturing techniques on their website? What about ingredients or materials used? Is environmentalism mentioned at all? How about renewable resources, recycling, upcycling or any other sustainable practices? Generally, if a company is doing any of these things, they will proudly advertise this; if not, you have to wonder if environmentalism is a priority for them.

4. Ask.

Write or call the company and ask them directly how they focus on sustainability. If you can’t get through to anyone who knows, or if their response sounds canned or inauthentic, those are red flags.

In general, the bigger the company, the more likely they are to cut corners when it comes to sustainability. But this dynamic is changing, and more companies are realizing that consumers are actually more likely to buy products from companies that are eco-friendly. Keep in mind, too, that almost no company can be 100% sustainable — at least not yet. So reward effort, and make wise and informed decisions about the purchases you make.

Action Item:

What’s the retail company you do business with the most? What does a quick Google search tell you about their sustainability practices? Is there a better alternative out there?
Putting It All Together

The first steps toward living a more sustainable life are education and awareness. Most of us don’t even realize the impact our actions (or inactions) have on the environment. Many of us mistakenly assume that making a meaningful change is too complicated or too hard. Not so! Just a few minor changes can make a huge impact.

Say you just picked one thing to change today. For example, imagine if you decided to switch to reusable grocery bags for the next year. If you generally use an average of 8 plastic bags a week for your groceries, you’d be saving 416 plastic bags a year, which is pretty on par with the American average for plastic bag use.

According to ReuseThisBag.com, producing even two plastic bags takes 13% more energy than producing one paper bag, so you’d be saving energy. Each year, 1 million birds and 100,000 turtles die of plastic ingestion, so you’d helping to save animals. Because plastic bag manufacturing releases toxic gases, you’d be helping to reduce greenhouse emission. You’d reduce the plastic bag debris that clutters trees, drains, and beaches. And of course, you would be making a small dent in the amount of non-biodegradable products that fill our landfills.

And that reusable bag that you’d use to replace your plastic bags? Just one reusable bag has a lifespan of 700 or more plastic bags, and when you take that reusable bag to the grocery store to shop, you will be performing an unintentional act of activism. You’d be surprised by how many shoppers will ask you about your bags or feel inspired to purchase a few reusable bags themselves.

And that’s just one example! Take on a few more eco-friendly practices and you’ll be able to an even stronger impact. Each new habit you add to your repertoire will feel that much easier to adopt. You’ll see your habits start to snowball from there, and soon sustainable living won’t be just an abstract idea, but a way of life. And what a profound gift that will be to the earth, your fellow humans, as well as generations of humans to come.