

Is it possible to buy weekly shopping in an Irish supermarket completely plastic-free?

As the 'war on plastic' rages on, is it really possible to ditch the packaging in everyday life? Lynne Caffrey and her family try to go waste-free for a week



Waste not, want not: Lynne Caffrey at the Dublin Food Co-op. Photo: Frank McGrath

Lynne Caffrey

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I was laden with guilt over my household waste long before David Attenborough highlighted it on Blue Planet II. Plastic is so prevalent in Aldi, where we shop, I'm surprised the Brussel sprouts aren't individually wrapped.

I'm not alone. My social media is as clogged as my bins with friends sharing petitions and tweeting supermarkets hoping to reduce the burden on the planet - and their consciences. Every day 2.5 million coffee cups are sent to landfill, while we still produce the sixth-highest amount of rubbish per head in the European Union. Ireland is now the biggest producer of plastic waste in Europe, according to recent Eurostat figures.

Changing rules around what can be recycled mean more is going to landfill (for example black plastic, cling film and 'soft plastics' i.e. shopping bags and bread bags are ruled out - even Barry's teabags contain a plastic that stops them being compostable).

Meanwhile, politicians are putting this on the long finger. "If we don't change the way we produce and use plastics, there will be more plastics than fish in our oceans by 2050," said European Commission first vice-president, Frans Timmermans, before announcing its commitment to make all plastic packaging across Europe recyclable or reusable by -wait for it - 2030.

Frozen food chain Iceland has also picked up the mantle, announcing it will introduce biodegradable

packaging on own-brand products... within five years.

Last week, frustration literally spilled on to Dublin's streets when campaign group VOICE dumped non-recyclable plastic at the gates of the Dáil. Other activists are posting packaging back to supermarkets, or leaving it at the till.



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Lynne Caffrey pictured filling her jars from the dispensers at the Dublin Food Co op in New Market Square, Dublin. Photo: Frank McGrath

While the conscience-salve of a big stunt is appealing, it's neither practical nor does it get to the root of the problem. The grass roots 'Zero Waste' movement, however, based on the refuse/reduce/recycle mantra, is gaining ground and makes sense. Zero Waste shops, market stalls and home delivery websites (where you supply your own jars to be filled), are popping up all over Ireland, while there are loads of books and websites offering advice on what families like mine can do to cut waste now. Is living waste-free really a possibility for my household? I decided to give it a go...

Day 1

My husband Gavin is sceptical, especially when I mention buying cotton hankies and a vermicomposter - a worm-fuelled compost system for food waste - as we don't have a brown bin collection. "Our balcony is too small and hankies are disgusting," he says, "anyway, the kids will never use them..." I look at my children with their fingers stuck up their nostrils and agree. I need advice.

Mum-of-one Timi Nicholson is driving the movement in Ireland through her blog Simplenowastelife.com. She says I should start by looking at what's going into the black bin and let the recycling bin look after itself for now. In the space of two years Timi, from Swords, has managed to reduce her landfill waste to the size of a coffee jar every month - she doesn't have a bin collection, instead making a once-monthly trip to the recycling plant.

My black bin is filled with soft plastics, tinfoil, kitchen roll, bits of toys, food and other stuff. I set up a compostable bin bag for food waste and look for ways to ditch the tin foil and cling film.

Then I raid the recycling for jars and lidded plastic cartons that Timi tells me I'll need for shopping at Zero Waste supermarkets. I wrack my brains to find a use for the huge plastic detergent bottles - Lego won't fit, nor pens. I give up, but in the hunt for inspiration I come across Facebook group Zero Waste Ireland which has nearly 10,000 members and ask to join. There I find recipes for everything from homemade detergent to sage-infused mouthwash. For now we visit Lilly's Eco Clean online to order detergent. It's €34.90 for five litres and comes in 50pc reused plastic, which I can have refilled. In the meantime, I spot-clean using a detergent bar I find under the sink.

Day 2

I gather my containers and a cotton bag and head to the supermarket. I need buttermilk for scones, yogurts for the school lunches, cheese and oranges.

Buttermilk comes in either a small, plastic container or a large plastic/paper carton with a plastic lid. I cop out and decide to mix lemon juice with milk we already have.

Yogurt is also tough - it's impossible to avoid plastic and glass isn't suitable for kids' lunchboxes. Eventually, I find a large tub with a cardboard body and recyclable plastic lid that I can decant into smaller containers. The cheese is easier, as the deli counter staff are happy to put it in my own container. I don't have the heart to complain about the sticky-backed price label they stick on it.

I nip to the greengrocers next door for loose oranges, spuds and some in-season vegetables - at almost twice the price of the supermarket.

Day 3

After a day-long clear-out, I cut up old clothes for dishcloths and dusters. My youngest, Holly, is fascinated and asks for a bag made of pyjama legs for her doll's accessories. As I sew, an unfamiliar feeling of domestic contentment washes over me... even the scones are edible. Is Zero Waste really so different from our grandmother's mantra of 'make do and mend'? I don't think so.

Day 4

There's drama when the hair detangler runs out. I refill the container with a squirt of conditioner in water and no one notices. After packing the children a lunch free from cling film and tinfoil, I deliver the remaining old clothes to the charity shop and the rest to the clothes bank. The house is less cluttered already and I'm more positive about what's left. It's addictive working out what can be reused.

Finding a milk lorry that will deliver glass bottles to our apartment proves tough, so I resign myself to buying milk cartons for now.

Then the tomato sauce runs out - cold water swirled around the bottom makes it last but this poses a dilemma. I'm coeliac and the major brand that comes in a recyclable glass bottle isn't gluten free. I keep the empty plastic bottle and decide to make my own.

Day 5

I'm in town all day so it's a good opportunity to pop along to the Dublin Food Co-op's 'no waste' section. I sit on the bus with a bag full of empty jars, as well as my food for the day. On the way, my pot of yogurt spills and I have to wash everything, again. I can negotiate my local Aldi blindfolded but the Co-op is very different, and I need a bit of help which is easy to find.

The range for coeliacs is great but a lot of it comes wrapped in plastic. I want some loose pasta but my jars aren't the right shape for the dispensers, leading to more faff. As well as food, they also stock eco-friendly pens, notepads, loo roll, feminine hygiene products, cleaning and beauty products (though I've heard Lush's

shampoo bars are also great). It's expensive compared to my normal shop, but members get discounts for bulk-buying and volunteering for a few hours a month. In this lifestyle it pays to be organised. A few doors up from the Co-op is a fruit and veg market with a meat stall which means I can shop in one place. It's a lovely, personal experience.

I get home and the children have been given Kinder Eggs. I wonder if the plastic is recyclable.

Day 6

We cut the bottom off the toothpaste to scrape out the last bits and I make a note to give chewable toothpaste tablets a go. The cupboards are bare and I don't have time to bake a GF loaf, so I pick up rice cakes, a block of cheese and fruit for my lunch. It's not perfect but the plastic can be recycled.

When I get home, Holly has made a boat from junk art in school (where plastic waste brought in by parents is repurposed). I count two large black plastic trays, bubble wrap and some silver foil tape that can't be recycled... Gavin has also been shopping so when I open the fridge, it's as if the last six days never happened.

Day 7

As I wash out the zip-lock freezer bags rescued from the bin, I remember Timi's reassurance that Zero Waste is an ideal, a goal, a 'journey' where every swap helps, and I suddenly feel optimistic all over again.

For more, visit zerowasteireland.com or dublinfood.coop

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