

## Oakland Farmers Markets Ban Plastic Bags

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*No more plastic bags at the market!*

They said they'd do it, and now [Urban Village Farmers Markets](#), the organization that runs the Temescal, Montclair, and Old Oakland farmers markets, has finally banned plastic bags! Originally scheduled to go into effect on October 1, the ban was pushed to January of this year to give vendors time to research their options and prepare for the change over. Beginning this month, a sign greets patrons as they enter the market informing them of the change and encouraging shoppers to bring their own reusable bags.

How do I feel? As someone who has been trying to live with as little plastic as possible for the past 2-1/2 years, just thinking about it makes me dance a little jig and channel KC & the Sunshine Band: "That's the way, uh huh uh huh, I like it, uh huh uh huh!"

I visited my local Temescal farmers market two weeks ago to see how the plastic bag ban was going and learned a few things. First, it's up to each vendor to decide how they will handle giving up plastic bags. While the market encourages customers to bring their own bags and skip disposables altogether, some vendors, like [Catalán Family Farm](#), have invested in compostable GMO-free [BioBags](#) as an alternative for those who forget.





Twin Girls Farm, on the other hand, offers paper bags but encourages customers to skip disposable bags altogether by first placing their produce into pre-weighed reusable plastic baskets, whose weight is then deducted from the total weight of the purchase. Customers can then empty their produce directly into their own reusable bags.



Some vendors have refused to invest in biodegradable bags of any sort. Ame Guseman from Rainbow Orchards, for example.



Some vendors have never used plastic in the first place. While there are several bread vendors at the Temescal Market who package their baked goods in plastic bags, Feel Good Bakery from Alameda has always used paper bags.



Before you judge her, check out what she sells instead: handmade reusable bags made from old T-shirts. And unlike most producers of T-shirt bags, Ame gets five bags out of one shirt. Calling her creations "Baygs," Ame demonstrates her ingenious idea in this video shot at the Alameda Farmers Market.



Other vendors have been slower to get on the plastic-free bandwagon, presumably in an effort to use up the plastic bags they already have. How can you tell a plastic bag from a compostable bag? A plastic bag will generally be made from HDPE and will have the "chasing arrows" symbol on it.





is salad greens presents unique challenges. Danny says that in a plastic bag, Happy Boy's greens are guaranteed to last 7 days. BioBags will not work, as they fall apart quickly. And customers want the convenience of buying one bag of greens and having them last all week long. What's more, BioBags are expensive. One plastic bag costs less than a penny, whereas BioBags cost 20 cents a piece. For the farmer, it's a financial hardship to try and sell mixed greens without plastic.

Still, Danny is passionate about reducing our dependence on disposable plastic. As a scuba diver, she has seen for herself how much plastic pollutes our oceans, and she does everything she can to encourage customers to switch to cloth bags like the ones she makes, consolidate their purchases into one bag, or to bring their own containers to the market. Whereas previously, she would hang rolls of plastic bags in multiple spots throughout Happy Boy's space, she now hangs one roll over the salad greens only.



Yet even after taking these steps, Danny estimates that Happy Boy customers consume about 3,000 bags in one day. She says that the plastic bags are her least favorite part of this job that she loves.

Before plastic, I suggested, shoppers would buy produce more often. Or they would eat the more fragile produce in the beginning of the week and eat the heartier vegetables later. Danny agreed but also shared that it's hard to convince people to go back to that way of living. Before the no-plastic policy went into effect, Danny even heard a customer say that she had switched from the Berkeley Farmers Market to Temescal simply because she could still get plastic bags there. Many customers "have a sense of entitlement."

And whether or not Urban Village is successful in switching away from plastic produce bags, there are still many vendors who pre-package their products in plastic. Cheese, tofu, sandwich spreads, and nuts come in plastic bags and containers. Boxes are lined with plastic. Meats are shrink-wrapped in the stuff.



Similarly, Danny Lazzarini from [Happy Boy Farms](#) makes and sells handmade produce bags whose materials are repurposed from thrift shop finds. "We have enough of everything already in this world," she told me. "We need to start reusing!"



Danny had a lot more to share with me about the new policy (she prefers that word to "ban") and the customers' reactions to it. Working for a farm whose main offering



It will be a while before farmers get beyond plastic entirely. We can help them by speaking up. Bringing our own bags and containers. Thanking the ones that offer alternatives to plastic and asking those who don't to make the switch. Here are some of my suggestions:



- 1) Put most produce directly into a canvas bag without using any produce bag.
- 2) Buy berries and cherry tomatoes in green plastic baskets and then return them to the farmer each week to be reused.
- 3) Bring egg cartons back to the farmer each week to be reused.
- 4) Carry home salad/stir fry greens in a cloth produce bag and transfer them to a metal bowl with dampened cloth over the top. Eat them early in the week.
- 5) Store fruits in large bowls in the refrigerator. No need for bags.
- 6) Store carrots in a container of water in the refrigerator.
- 7) Purchase loose nuts and dried fruits in cloth produce bags and store in glass jars in the refrigerator.

In an effort to help farmers and customers learn to buy and store food without plastic, the Berkeley Ecology Center has developed a printable guide: [How To Store Fruits and Vegetables, Tips & Tricks to Extend the Life of Your Produce Without Plastic](#). The guide has storage suggestions for almost every type of vegetable or fruit you can think of.

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