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The quest to produce less trash

Eve Schaub, a 52-year-old writer in Pawlet, Vt.¹, conducted an experiment with her husband and two teenage daughters in 2020, trying to go an entire year without throwing anything away. The project, which she wrote about in *Year of No Garbage: Recycling Lies, Plastic Problems, and One Woman's Trashy Journey to Zero Waste*, made her realize how seldom plastic is recycled, and how harmful it is to the ecosystem and to human health.

"We've been sold this bill of goods² that if we all just recycle, everything will be fine," she says. "That's a lie. Plastic is very hard for the recycling plants³ to process. Plus, you have to add new chemicals when you do. It's this [...] material that does not break down and does not go away."

That's not to say Schaub has sworn off recycling. Rather, a major focus of the book and her family's lifestyle is avoiding products made of or packaged in single-use plastic. They've largely succeeded. In the past, the family produced 96 gallons⁴ of trash per week. During 2020, they produced almost none (the exception was "health and safety" items such as feminine hygiene products and Band-Aids). These days they produce nine gallons⁵ of trash per week, which they take, along with their recycling, to a local waste transfer station⁶. While products with reusable or recyclable packaging can cost more, the change has saved them money in other ways. Canceling their waste pickup service, for instance, put \$65 back in their monthly budget.

April Dickinson, a 39-year-old communications specialist in Spokane, Wash.⁷, who lives with her husband and children, ages 7 and 11, takes a more flexible approach. Her family still has a waste pickup service, but they downgraded to the smallest size bin. She became interested in zero waste in 2016, inspired by popular figures like Bea Johnson⁸, who became famous for fitting a year's worth of trash into a small jar. But Dickinson found such strict goals untenable⁹.

"I just knew that it wasn't realistic for my family," she says.

By identifying as the "sole zero waster in a family of four" on social media, she believes she contributes to the diversity of the movement by showing that you don't have to be "all or nothing." [...]

Eliminating food waste requires eating differently from the typical American. [...] Schaub and Dickinson still shop for food, but bring reusable bags, buy in bulk¹⁰ when possible and look for products in recyclable packaging.

¹ Vermont, delstat i USA

² *We've been sold this bill of goods*: Vi er blevet narret til at tro

³ *recycling plants*: affaldssorteringsanlæg

⁴ *96 gallons*: ca. 365 liter

⁵ *nine gallons*: ca. 34 liter

⁶ *waste transfer station*: genbrugsstation

⁷ Washington, delstat i USA

⁸ *Bea Johnson*: amerikansk miljøaktivist

⁹ urealistiske

¹⁰ *in bulk*: i løs vægt

“Sometimes it’s a very clear choice,” says Schaub. “Like, I could buy the ketchup in the plastic bottle, which is not going to get recycled, or I could buy it in the glass bottle, which will.”

30 Living in a rural area allows Schaub’s family access to options like buying milk in a reusable bottle from a local dairy¹¹ and getting meat from a butcher where she can take her own containers. But many snack foods are off the table.

“It’s virtually impossible to buy potato chips that aren’t in single-use plastic,” Schaub says. The upside is that it pushes her family to eat a healthier diet. [...]

35 “I think I tried every zero-waste product in the world,” says Schaub.

She uses soap tablets for their dishwasher and laundry, but says finding a sponge that’s not made of plastic was surprisingly hard. She is wary of¹² “greenwashing” – when companies describe a product with terms such as “sustainable”, which have no legal definition and can be misleading.

40 “A lot of the time, a product will say it’s eco-friendly, but if you really look into the materials you find, oh, it’s made with 50 percent bamboo and 50 percent plastic,” says Schaub. [...]

All this effort can feel like swimming upstream in a world that’s not on board¹³.

“It can be very hard to feel like anything that I do on an individual level matters,” says Dickinson. “But what I always return to is the fact that living my life in a way that aligns¹⁴ with my values is very fulfilling.”

45 And, she says, striving for personal accountability¹⁵ can give people perspective on policies that would lead to better outcomes.

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¹¹ mejeri

¹² wary of: på vagt over for

¹³ that’s not on board: (her) der ikke er med på ideen

¹⁴ stemmer overens

¹⁵ (her) ansvarlighed