

# Understanding the Meaning of Zero Waste

The term “zero-waste” is used to describe the act of minimizing the amount of waste generated. With all the disposable products on the market, the concept can be intimidating if you aren’t informed about its true meaning. The “zero” in zero-waste seems to imply that waste will be eliminated, but most supporters of zero-waste agree that generating no waste at all is nearly impossible. One of those reasons is that we do not directly control the production and packaging of products by manufacturers.

The act of practicing zero-waste is a comprehensive approach to eliminating waste at all stages of the production chain, from resource extraction, manufacturing, product packaging, to the consumer. Responsibility for waste is accepted at all stages, thus closing the loop for waste to occur, and ensuring resources are conserved with little to no impact on the environment. Thus, creating a circular economy where very little waste is produced and sent to landfills (Figure 1).

## Benefits of practicing zero-waste living

There are numerous benefits to practicing a zero-waste lifestyle that not only help the environment but can benefit local economies and communities. Potential benefits include:

1. **Environmental Benefits.** Producing less waste means less waste is sent to landfills, which in turn reduces methane gas emissions and potential threats to groundwater and surrounding habitats. Methane, one of the gasses responsible for climate change, is released when garbage breaks down in landfills. Practicing zero-waste habits can also indirectly save energy, land, space, and water by producing less material goods.
2. **Long-term Financial Savings.** Money can be saved when practicing a zero-waste lifestyle since items are reused multiple times, versus one use and then disposed of. Borrowing items can save money. Preventing food waste and eating leftovers can also result in significant savings over a year. Additionally, working to reduce impulse purchases can result in significant savings.
3. **Local Economic Benefits.** The recycling industry requires significantly more manpower compared to what is needed for landfill disposal. Recycling can create jobs for the residents of local communities that

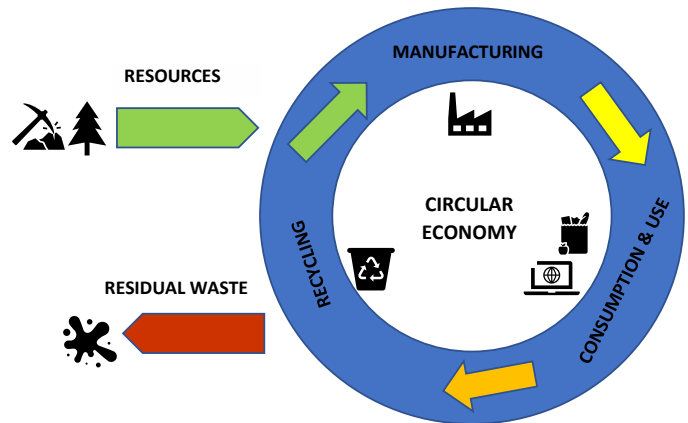


Figure 1. Circular Economy model.

choose to start a recycling program. Businesses save money when they recycle by cutting costs associated with garbage disposal fees. Shopping locally can save energy and support small businesses which further benefits local economies.

4. **Rewarding Experience.** Knowing that you are conserving resources for future generations can give you a sense of paying it forward for the next generation. You also have an opportunity to change social norms in your community. If friends and neighbors see your lifestyle changes, they may be more open to mirroring your zero-waste behavior.

## Starting a zero-waste lifestyle

Everyone can take part in zero-waste living, regardless of where they live or how much money they make. Collectively, we can all make small changes to our lifestyles that can have a huge impact on conserving natural resources and assist in closing the waste loop. Living a zero-waste lifestyle does not happen overnight. Small steps should be taken initially to prevent being overwhelmed by the process. The practice of zero-waste should be focused on progress and not perfection. The following are a few things you should take into consideration as you begin zero-waste living:

1. **Consider why you want to begin the zero-waste lifestyle.** You may want to conserve resources, protect the environment, save money, and/or avoid

- plastics. Your reasoning will drive the types of habits you add to your lifestyle as you begin reducing waste from your life.
2. **Conduct a trash audit in your home.** Review the materials you are throwing away on a weekly basis. For instance, are you using a lot of disposal paper towels and plates? An audit will give you a clear picture of the first items you should work to eliminate from your life. Replacing paper towels with cloth dish towels is a great first step!
  3. **Refuse items you don't need.** Refuse plastic bags, straws, or free promotional items when they are offered to you. Bring your own food containers when dining out instead of using the disposable ones provided by restaurants. Carry your own reusable bags to the grocery store. Enroll in paperless statements when available and ask to be removed from paper mailing lists.
  4. **Plan out your meals.** Before going to the grocery store, check your pantry and refrigerator to see what items you already have on hand. This will help avoid buying food you don't need. Waste from food is a huge issue in the United States and it is estimated that up to 40 percent of food produced is wasted.
  5. **Reuse items instead of throwing them away.** For example, save glass jars and reuse them to store leftovers. Also, consider swapping out disposable products for reusables. Instead of using disposable sandwich bags for lunch, swap these out with reusable containers to store your food. Donate clothing and other household items to local charities as another way to prevent waste.
  6. **Recycle items when you can't reuse them.** This helps slow down the extraction of natural resources and saves energy. However, keep in mind that the process for every recyclable material is not equal. Materials such as metal and glass can be recycled indefinitely without losing quality. However, plastics are often difficult to recycle, and many plastics end up in landfills.
  7. **Compost food scraps and paper.** It's estimated food makes up 24 percent of the waste in landfills, which highly contributes to methane gas production. Composting food waste is one of the most impactful things you can do to protect the environment. See MSU Extension Publication P1782 Composting for the Mississippi Gardener for more information.
  8. **Purchase brands made of recyclable or biodegradable packaging.** This not only cuts down on waste but also increases demand for these product brands. Other manufacturers are more likely to make the switch to more eco-friendly packaging when they see the demand increase. Also, try to buy food in bulk so less packaging is needed.
  9. **Be an advocate in your community.** Tell elected officials about the importance of reducing waste in our communities. If local governments know their constituents support the elimination of wasteful practices and the creation of recycling and composting programs, they may be more likely to implement these practices.

## References:

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