

# The Plastic Bag: A Short History

by Judi Burton

**“Hi, I’m a plastic bag. I am here simply for your momentary convenience, and then I am discarded. I am one of 500 million to 1 trillion produced and shuffled off to the farthest reaches of the planet every year. I will continue wandering about the environment, the oceans and streams, and survive about 1000 years, or so. Of course, I won’t be fully intact by then—I will be in small bits—and wherever I am, I will leach my chemicals into the earth or water. I also act like a sponge and soak up chemicals around me, only to release them again when I’ve been sitting in the hot sun. I am told there is a massive trash island in the middle of the ocean. I think someday I should take a flight on the wind to the beach and see if I can’t make it out there. God forbid I should end up as a doggy pick-up bag. Yuck! I wish I were a MY ECO reusable bag. You know, one of those bags that are really colorful and sturdy. They get reused more often than a suitcase! It unzips into four separate bags that each have specific uses. One is for frozen and cold foods, one is for glass, a third is for produce, and the fourth holds everything else. If we plastic bags must live for 1000 years, we at least want to be useful more than one time.”**



## P. Bag

The worldwide history of the plastic grocery bag begins with Gordon Dancy back in 1977. He was a very good-hearted man, and was worried about the destruction of our trees for single-use paper bags. He didn’t want us to lose all of our natural forest beauty for the sake of having something with which to carry our milk and eggs home. The general public did not like the early poorly designed plastic bags at first. Dancy refined the design with “T-shirt handles” and a flat bottom, which became the standard we use today. Before he died, however, he recognized that his well-intentioned alternative to paper bags turned into something much worse. He tried to get the company that developed the bag with him to create a recycling system, but it was disinterested. The cost involved in collecting and recycling the bags was too prohibitive.

### Like Father, Like Daughter

Kristin Brown, of Pawleys Island, is Dancy’s daughter. She has followed in her father’s footsteps by putting together a

shopping bag system called MY ECO Bag, which revolutionizes the way we shop. Not only does the MY ECO Bag make carrying your purchases home easier, it helps students learn about recycling and can actually earn schools money for supplies. I met with her to learn more about her system. “I wanted to focus on something that was more functional,” said Brown, who came up with the four-bag system because of her awareness that mothers are the main shoppers and that being organized is a huge part of being a mom. I myself can remember as a kid, my mother would organize the grocery cart and checkout conveyor. We never made the mistake of mashing the bread with a heavy milk carton.

### Do it for the Children

Brown is a mother of two and is very concerned with how our children are learning about sustainability. “If we can teach them to recycle and reuse now, we’ll have a lot less problems later on. They are more receptive as kids.” She has set up a School Reuse Challenge with Waccamaw

Intermediate and Teach My People in the Grand Strand, but Brown wants to see as many schools as possible jump on the bandwagon. "All you have to do is go online or buy a bag straight from the school. The school will automatically receive \$5 toward school supplies. If you take the bag to Piggly Wiggly or Food Lion and scan the bag, the school gets more points." Owners of the bags can re-scan the bags every time they shop at the store to accumulate as many points as they would like. The system is also growing across the country. New Jersey has more than 80 schools involved. Brown is also spearheading a brand new campaign for a recycling curriculum, which is taught from an online program and can be used by any teacher for an English-speaking class. There are many different activities and goals in the curriculum. Some kids perform plays, acting out the life of a plastic bag; some perform in public area flash mob songs; and some create public service announcements to be televised on local TV and radio.

### **What to Do with the Poo**

Having two dogs, I do a lot of dog walking and picking up, so I know what it is like to be thankful of a new batch of plastic bags next to the door for our walks. What would I do without plastic grocery bags? The question is easily answered once you realize how many other bags you use on a daily basis, such as coffee bags, Ziplock bags, popcorn bags, waxy cereal bags, produce bags, newspaper bags, and more. Also, most pet shops now sell biodegradable, non-toxic plastic doggy bags that are inexpensive and will decompose quickly in landfills.

### **People Are Looking at Me Funny**

So, of course, I had to try the MY ECO Bag. It fit into my shopping cart like a puzzle. Some people looked curious, others looked at me as if I were crazy, and others were pretty open and asked me what they were. Some even asked me if they could buy one, which are available online and now

at Food Lion and Piggly Wiggly. The cashier seemed to like it, too. Since everything was already separated, her job was that much easier; just scan and return everything back into the same bags. I left the store feeling as if I might have just set a new fashion trend, and had visions of paparazzi cameras flashing. As the automatic store doors swished open, I glanced upward and noticed a plastic bag stuck up in a tree, waving in the wind like a white flag, surrendering to its thousand-year life on this planet.

### **Home Sweet Home**

My front door is quite far from my parking space, so I often struggle with my usual shopping bags. The MY ECO Bag has big, wide straps that made it easy for me to sling over my shoulder and waddle my way to the door. I liked that I could put the bags down in the kitchen according to where they were supposed to go. The cold foods' bag went next to the fridge, glass near the cupboard, and so on. The bags are manufactured from recycled yogurt containers, which makes it easy to just spray and wipe instead of throwing in the washing machine.

I couldn't finish the article without finding out what happened to that shopping bag caught in the tree. I came back many more times to that same store and always saw it fluttering there. It seemed the strongest winds couldn't get it to break free for more than a month. I stopped in one more time recently and saw not one but two bags on the tree and I finally broke down. I explained to the store manager that I was writing an article about plastic bags and she was apologetic about the litter in the tree. She told me she would get someone to pluck the bags down as soon as possible. It felt kind of good to liberate the beautiful tree from the plastic bags. Now, what to do about the 1 trillion others?



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