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Reusable bags come in a variety of materials, styles and patterns and can be used for more than just shopping.

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Get carried away with cheap, chic reusable bags

By Susan Martin
HOME & STYLE EDITOR

It's not enough that reusable shopping bags can provide a "greener" way to tote your goods. Now, they also can make a fashion statement, send a message or match your mood – not to mention your outfit.

Widely available, many of these stylish sacks cost less than \$10, many less than \$2.

They are sold in larger retail and chain stores, of course, but also in gift shops and other specialty stores where the emphasis is, indeed, on novelty.

In addition, numerous Web sites are devoted to them. One site, www.reusablebags.com, carries such popular brands as Envirosax. The company's designs include flora-patterned reusable shopping bags made of durable, waterproof lightweight polyester as well as an organic series of reusable bags.

At Clutch, a store at 814 Elmwood Ave. specializing in handbags and other accessories, Carrie Fitzgerald sells reusable, long-handled soft totes with splashy graphics beginning at \$4.

People buy them mostly for groceries, Fitzgerald said. And what's nice about them is that you can simply fold them up and stash them in a purse.

One design features red cherries on a tan background. Another has red, yellow and blue fish printed on it with the phrase "Fish Dealer."

Reusable bags come in a variety of materials – polyester, string, cotton, canvas, hemp, nonwoven polypropylene and more – as well as an eclectic array of colors and designs. Some even come with their own storage pouch.

Some bags are "greener" than others, depending on such factors as what materials they are made from and how long they are designed to last.

The bottom line, of course, is that reusable bags only are effective if people remember to use them as an alternative to having their purchases bagged in a new plastic shopping bag.

Some tips: When choosing a reusable bag, think about how you like to carry a bag. A longer strap will fit on your shoulder, for example, while a short one will not.

If you are not one to walk around carrying a bag with a store's logo, find a bag without one.

Also, if you plan to carry a lot, look for a bag with an extra wide side gusset and strongly reinforced seams.

Some bags are water-resistant or waterproof, if that is important to you.

You'll also find that some bags are washable. Be sure to read the hangtag.

At Everything Elmwood, owner Kelly La Martina offers reusable bags in chic patterns. She displays them as an option for packaging gifts — an alternative to traditional paper gift bags.

If you're buying someone a gift, for another \$4.99 you can put the gift in one of these bags for the person to carry and reuse again and again, she said.

She also sells a market-style bag made from woven bamboo and natural grasses with wooden handles that is pricier — about \$40.

Some retailers even take their reusable bags a step further, using them to send a message and maybe even raise money for a cause.

The Body Shop sells a reusable, organically grown cotton bag for \$5 with a message: "Green is not a colour it's a state of mind," for example. Proceeds go to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Artisans and those with sewing skills also are getting into the act, designing bags from fabric remnants and even old clothes.


Indeed, Martha Stewart once did a segment on making reusable grocery bags out of old T-shirts.

Talk about making a fashion statement.

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