Think Globally, Shop Locally, and Mean It

By Susan Crosby

The need to reduce our use of natural resources and energy requires a fresh look at where and how we shop, but making the right choices can be tough. To avoid "analysis paralysis," these guidelines may help.

Starter Guidelines

Before buying anything, ask: Do I really need more stuff?

If yes, then shop in person when possible, taking your own shopping bags along. During the pandemic, online shopping was a lifesaver, but it became a habit that is hurting us now. Extra transportation miles and costs, and mountains of cardboard and plastic packaging exacerbate our environmental crisis. And there's a greater inclination to buy on impulse when shopping online – something retailers count on. Count to five before you click "BUY".

Check out Earth.org's commentary on the environmental impacts of shopping online: https://earth.org/online-shopping-and-its-environmental-impact/

Consider Toilet Paper. For this pandemic favorite, look for brands made from bamboo or recycled paper and not wrapped in plastic. For decades, Seventh Generation has made "green" paper towels, tissues, and napkins. If they would switch from plastic outer wrappers, they'd be a better choice.

Although it's only available online, WHO GIVES A CRAP – yes, really their name, an Australian company with a base in Southern California – is inexpensive, made of recycled paper or bamboo, free of chemicals, and wrapped in paper decorated with playful designs and cheeky puns. The company donates 50% of their profits to "help everyone gain access to clean water and a toilet," with over $14 million dollars raised to date. Their paper towels, tissues, dog poop bags, and cleaning sponges are all recycled, compostable, or both.

Another excellent online choice is PlantPaper, made from 100% FSC-Certified carbon-neutral bamboo, lab-tested, and ticking all the right boxes for non-toxics.

Clothing

This is a tough one. Most fabrics currently made are either entirely petroleum-based or synthetics blended with natural fabrics like cotton, linen, and hemp. Once natural fibers are mixed with petroleum products, they become almost impossible to separate for recycling or even composting.

"Natural" doesn't necessarily mean "good." Cotton and linen, seemingly great options, require large amounts of water, can involve extensive pesticide use, and are often cultivated in places where child labor is common. Look for organic cotton certified under the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), the Organic Content Standard (OCS) and OEKO-TEX Organic Cotton, or fabrics certified under sustainability programs like Facts (NSF/ANSI 336). Hemp is another ethical and environmental choice.

A landmark, peer-reviewed life-cycle study conducted by SCS Global Services for clothing designer Stella McCartney looked at the cradle-to-grave impacts of ten different sources of man-made cellulose fiber used in apparel. The lowest environmental impacts were flax and – no surprise – recycled fibers. Ideally, recycled content claims will be independently certified. To learn more about the study findings, check this site: https://www.scsglobalservices.com/resource/lca-comparing-ten-sources-of-manmade-cellulose-fiber

Our best alternative is to love the clothes we already own, wear them until they need mending, then mend them. Savvy high school and college students do just that, making "visible mending" a fashion statement. And for clothes you'll never wear again, give them to someone who will, or look for clothing swaps.

Consider vintage clothing, too, often better made and from fabrics that are too expensive for the ready-to-wear of today. Some Napa options include Bombshell Vintage, Uptown Vintage, Antiques on Second, Ghost Pony, Betty's Girl Napa, Field Day, CP Thrift Store aka Community Projects, and The Discovery Shop, benefitting the American Cancer Society. The latter two are run by volunteers.

Finally, in the undergarment category, I would like to salute a now-vanished eco-clothing company whose slogan was "change begins with your underwear."

Stay tuned for cleaning products, personal care items, food and beverages in the next column.

Susan Crosby is a former teacher and a volunteer with Napa Climate NOW! who hopes the *Butterfly Effect* will prove to be true.

Photo credit: Susan Crosby
Photo caption: Used jeans on parade at Community Projects

