

Creating a Zero Waste Home

By Julie Fathy, juliefathy@gmail.com

Living with thoughtful intention and deep reverence toward the natural world has always guided me. As part of my simple living path, I started critically thinking about my family's waste over a decade ago. My approach to zero-waste living is constantly evolving, but my ethics have remained consistent through the years. For me, zero-waste living means consuming less, adopting make, thrift, and mend practices, and eating a locally grown and cooked-from-scratch diet. I look for simple and affordable solutions to reduce my waste and create a beautiful home that honors the earth.

Whether you are new to the zero-waste lifestyle or are well on your way, I recommend you start with an informal trash audit. Looking into your trash bin can tell a lot about the type of waste you create and how best to reduce it. Once you've established areas to improve, begin with easy-to-adopt zero-waste practices, adding one at a time until it becomes a habit. A zero-waste lifestyle can quickly become overwhelming if you try to initiate too many changes at once. Please remember to give yourself some grace; perfection is not realistic. That said, I encourage you to try your best and then a little bit more.

I sometimes get asked, how do I get my family, friends, or roommates on board with this lifestyle? My suggestion is to be gentle and kind in your encouragement and be very patient. It can be frustrating, but I find pushing people only creates resistance. My family respects my choices, and while they may not always follow suit, they have the awareness that gives them pause in their choices. I role model, educate, and gently make requests of my family, but I allow each person to go at their own pace and find their path. I recommend finding or creating a zero-waste or intentional living community to garner support and encouragement.

I hope what I share here is just a jumping-off point for further exploration. Ideas and information on zero-waste living are readily available online and in books. Your journey should be unique to your lifestyle, interests, and talents. Wherever the road takes you, I hope you find beauty along the way.

*With gratitude,
Julie*

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MY APPROACH TO ZERO WASTE LIVING

1. Drastically reduce your consumption of goods.
 - Reduce the urge to buy.
 - Unsubscribe and remove your name, email, and address from marketing email and postal mailing lists.
 - Limit participation in social media and avoid following influencers and corporations.
 - Enforce a shopping ban by “buying nothing new” for a month or longer.
 - Boycott Amazon.
 - Postpone purchases to avoid unnecessary consumption.
 - Simplify and minimize your needs.
 - Before buying something, ask yourself:
 - Is it a need or want?
 - Can I live without it?
 - Can I borrow or buy it secondhand?
 - Do I already own something that can serve the same purpose?
 - Have I used up the products I own?
 - Am I replacing something broken, and if so, can it be repaired?
 - When you do buy new, ask yourself:
 - Is it made from natural and sustainable materials?
 - Does it come package-free, and if not, is the packaging plastic-free, compostable, or recyclable?
 - Will it last a lifetime? Will I want to keep it for life?
 - Can the item be repurposed at the end of its life? Can it be composted?
 - Can you find it locally (sourced or made)?
 - Does it support a small business or put money into the pockets of a big corporation? Are you investing in a local economy?
 - Is it organic, Fairtrade, sustainable, or ethically produced?
2. Learn and practice skills to make, thrift, and mend, which helps to reduce waste but also creates resilience in your life.
3. Simplify your life. *“Pare down to the essence but don’t remove the poetry.”* ~ Leonard Koren
4. Create systems to help commit zero-waste practices to habit.
5. Connect with a zero-waste community for support, inspiration, and knowledge sharing.

THE ZERO WASTE KITCHEN

The kitchen is where most household waste comes from and may be the first place to attack. Below I've outlined many ideas on how to reduce waste in the kitchen.

1. Zero Waste Shopping

What to bring:

- Cloth shopping bags*
 - Cloth produce/bulk/bread bags*
 - Jars and bottles
 - Stainless-steel containers
 - Other containers you already own
 - Bandanas, kitchen towels, napkins* (Furoshiki wrap: <https://tinyurl.com/5fxzpbj>)
- *Use what you have around the house, but if you buy new bags or food wraps, make sure they are 100% natural fibers. You can compost natural fibers at the end of their life. Synthetic fibers must go to the landfill.

Bulk Shopping with Mason Jars:

1. Collect your jars. Thrift stores are a great place to find mason jars. Ask family and friends if they have any to donate to your cause.
2. Determine the tare weight of your jars. Tare weight is the weight in pounds of your container. When checking out at the store, the cashier will subtract the tare weight from the total weight of the filled jar – thus, you'll only be paying for the food. Below are some mason jars with tare weights, although I'd recommend confirming your tare weights.

Size of jar	Type of jar	Tare weight
¼ pint / 4 oz	jelly jar	.33 lb.
½ pint / 8 oz	regular mouth jar	.43 lb.
½ pint / 8 oz	wide mouth jar	.46 lb.
1 pint / 16 oz	wide mouth jar	.67 lb.
1 ½ pint / 24 oz	wide mouth jar	.86 lb.
1 quart / 32 oz	wide mouth jar	1 lb.
½ gallon / 64 oz	wide mouth jar	1.71 lb.

3. Make jar labels from reused cardstock or thin cardboard. Trace the jar lid onto the cardstock and cut it out.
4. Write the ingredient name, tare weight, and PLU onto the label. You can add the tare weight and PLU at the store if you don't know it. Place the lid, label, and ring on the jar.

5. Place jars in a basket to carry to the store. Be sure your store is equipped to subtract tare weights at check out.
6. Fill your jars and check out.
7. Reuse the labels when you need to refill a jar. Be sure to match the correct jar with the tare weight indicated on the label and fill it with the product that matches the PLU.

Where to shop and source food:

- The perimeter of the grocery store
- The bulk section
- Cooperative and health food grocery stores
- Farmers markets
- Direct from the farmer/producer
- Your refrigerator, freezer, and pantry
- Your garden or community garden

When zero waste isn't an option:

- Pick better packaging: paper, aluminum, tin, steel, and glass
- When weighing in on packaging, perhaps put locally and sustainably grown food as a priority
- Recycle responsibly: learn what your city accepts and make sure you clean food containers before putting them in the bin
- Request companies change to better or no packaging
- Simply say no to some food items
 - Convenience foods
 - Bottled water and other beverages
 - Foods packaged in plastic, especially single-use
 - Eat lower on the food chain

2. Zero Waste Foods

- Cook from scratch to avoid unnecessary waste.
- Make meals from whole foods, rather than packaged/prepared foods
- In addition to homemade meals, consider other foods to make from scratch:
 - Yogurt
 - Condiments: mayonnaise, ketchup, mustard
 - Salad dressings
 - Cereal: granola, muesli, oatmeal
 - Snacks: popcorn, trail mix, crackers, cookies, bars
 - Nut and seed milk
 - Fermented foods
 - Home-preserved foods
 - Legumes prepared from dried
 - Bone and vegetable broth
- Make coffee and tea without the waste
 - Fill your container at the bulk section with coffee and tea leaves
 - Grow or forage plants to make your herbal tea blends
 - Use a stove-top espresso maker, French press, or a reusable filter for a coffee maker or pour-over coffee
 - Use a tea ball or strainer in place of tea bags

3. Zero Waste Food On-The-Go

Pack a zero-waste to-go kit:

- Reusable water bottle
- Reusable coffee cup
- Stainless steel tiffin, bento box, or other food containers
- Cloth bags, beeswax wrap
- Silverware
- Reusable straw
- Napkin

4. Reduce Food Waste

- Having a deeper appreciation for your food is the first step towards reducing waste. Show gratitude to the animals, plants, and people that play a part in nourishing your body.
- Learn how your food was grown, raised, or produced and get to know the people involved. Questions to ask: who grew it; where and how was it grown/raised; who harvested it; how far has it traveled; what resources were needed to grow it and bring it to your table; how does it nourish your body? Understanding the story of your food can provide answers on how to avoid waste.
- Cook from scratch. There's less waste when you prepare meals from whole foods and you're less likely to waste food that you've invested time to prepare.
- Simplify your meals through repetitive cooking. Have a repertoire of seven or eight meals that your family loves and serve them on repeat.
- Keep a well-stocked pantry with foods your family routinely consumes. Having staples on hand, like grains, dried legumes, nuts, dried fruit, spices, oils, canned tomatoes, etc. can help turn perishable foods into a meal.
- Make a meal plan and grocery list and stick to them.
- Learn how to cook without a recipe. It's helpful to get familiar with different cuisines. Having a basic understanding of the flavors and ingredients that are used in different cuisines allows creativity and gives you the flexibility to pull together different ingredients successfully.
- Stretch out the time between shopping trips. Clean out the fridge, freezer, and pantry before filling it again. No one is going to reach for a bruised apple when there's a shiny new one sitting right next to it.
- Buy perishables in quantities that will be used up to avoid food waste.
- Do some meal prep when you return from the store, market, or farm, like washing and cutting up veggies so they are ready to use.
- Properly store produce to prevent spoilage: <https://tinyurl.com/4xtws8a5>.
- Eat perishable foods in order of longevity. Eat the head of lettuce before the kale, peaches before the apples, milk before the yogurt, etc.
- Have some go-to dishes that are good at utilizing leftovers or foods that are soon to spoil. Some of our family favorites are fried rice, soups, and frittatas, which are great for using up leftover grains, veggies, meats, and cheeses. Homemade pudding and yogurt are good to use up milk that's soon to sour. Smoothies are perfect for using up overripe fruit. The possibilities are endless.
- Freeze foods for later consumption. I freeze everything from chunks of cheese, to leftover soups and casseroles, to juice and zest from citrus. I also make a point to "shop" from the freezer, so that foods are rotated out on a regular basis.

- Ferment foods to increase their shelf-life.
- Don't toss those food odds and ends that are often considered trash. Beet and other veggie greens that are often tossed can be sauteed, carrot tops and herb stems can be made into pesto, broccoli stems stripped of the tough outer layer can be grated for slaw or cooked along with the florets, meat bones and veggie waste, such as onion skins and carrot peels can be made into broth, parmesan rinds can impart flavor into a soup and stale bread makes delicious croutons or breadcrumbs. There are many vegetables that can be regrown from their scraps. Green onions, celery, basil, and bok choy are a few you can start from scraps.
- Compost your kitchen waste! Keeping food waste out of the landfill is probably one of the biggest and most important steps you can take.
- Get inspired. Cookbooks and food memoirs can be a source of inspiration. Two of my favorite books are *An Everlasting Meal: Cooking with Economy and Grace* by Tamar Adler and *The Zero Waste Chef* by Anne Marie Bonneau.

5. Equipping Your Zero Waste Kitchen

- Keep a spare kitchen
 - Have only the necessary kitchen tools
 - Don't buy or keep duplicates of kitchen tools
 - Avoid specialty tools that only serve one purpose
- Buy secondhand
- Buy the best quality tools that will last for life
- Buy from companies who stand behind their products and will repair them
- Keep a paperless kitchen:
 - Cloth napkins
 - Kitchen towels and rags in place of paper towels
- Use up your plastic containers, bags, and wrap, but as needed replace them with plastic-free food storage:
 - Jars
 - Glass containers
 - Stainless steel containers (bento boxes)
 - Beeswax wraps
 - Reusable cloth bowl covers
 - Plates and bowls
 - Casserole dishes
 - Cloth wraps (Furoshiki wrap: <https://tinyurl.com/5fxzpbj>)
- Wear an apron to protect your clothes and keep them out of the landfill.
- Things to avoid:
 - Plastic kitchenware
 - Teflon
 - Plastic wrap and bags
 - Unnecessary gadgets

THE ZERO WASTE BATHROOM

- Simplify your beauty and hygiene products to use only what is needed
 - Give up unnecessary products, like hair gels and sprays, makeup, specialized skin products, etc.
- Use up the products you already have before buying anything new
- Use package-free soap, preferably palm oil free, in place of liquid soap
- Make your products
 - Salves and balms to replace packaged creams, lotions, and lip balms
 - Beauty products such as lip/cheek color and mascara
 - Deodorant
 - Toothpaste/powder
 - “No-poo” shampoo and conditioner
 - Natural remedies
- Use recycled or bamboo toilet paper with plastic-free packaging
- Use a safety razor and bar soap for shaving
- Use solid shampoo and conditioner bars, refill shampoo and conditioner where bulk shopping is available, or try “no poo”
- Reduce the amount of product you use
- Use a menstrual cup in place of disposable pads and tampons
- Use a bamboo toothbrush and biodegradable floss
- Use cloth hankies instead of tissue
- Use washcloths and cloth wipes for washing up and removing makeup
- Choose products with plastic-free packaging
- Compost hair and nail clippings
- Go au natural!

Recipes for a Zero Waste Bathroom

Herbal Salve

A homemade salve is the only product I use to moisturize my skin. The salve is made quickly with two ingredients: olive oil and beeswax. I buy the olive oil in bulk and the beeswax package-free from a local beekeeper. Although not necessary, it is lovely to infuse olive oil with herbs, flowers, and plants. Look online or in medicinal herbal books for instructions on how to make an herbal infused oil. You'll need to use or create a double boiler for this recipe. I set a glass Pyrex measuring cup (four-cup size) into a small saucepan to create a double boiler.

1 c herbal infused olive oil
1 oz beeswax

Heat oil and wax in tempered glass or metal container set over simmering water. When the wax melts, gently stir, and pour into jars. Let cool on the counter. Store the extra jars in a cool place. Adjust olive oil or wax to get the consistency you like. I usually use a smidge over a cup of oil to 1 oz of wax for the perfect consistency.

Simple Tooth Powder

You can make a simple tooth powder from two ingredients in your pantry, sea salt and baking soda. If you are easing someone into the change from toothpaste to powder, add xylitol for sweetness and additional medicinal properties. Please check with your dentist to make sure this is a good choice for you and your family.

1 Tbsp baking soda
1 tsp fine sea salt
2 tsp xylitol, *optional*

Put ingredients in a jar and shake to combine. Scale up the recipe to meet your needs. Spoon the tooth powder onto a wet toothbrush and brush.

Deodorant

¼ cup alcohol, such as vodka, gin, or grain alcohol (80-120 proof*)
2 tsp distilled white vinegar

Combine ingredients in a small glass spray bottle. Spray your armpits with two pumps and allow drying before putting on clothes. **A stronger proof alcohol provides better protection.*

THE ZERO WASTE WARDROBE

- Limit your clothing purchases by determining your style.
 - Consider timeless styles
 - Choose a limited color palette
 - Determine styles that are best for your body type
 - Create a capsule wardrobe
 - Don't buy clothes for your fantasy self
- Shop from your closet.
- Purchase mostly secondhand clothes.
- When purchasing new clothes, consider companies that follow sustainable and ethical practices.
- Make your clothes with repurposed fabric.
- Choose 100% natural fiber clothing rather than synthetic or synthetic blends.
- Keep a minimal wardrobe.
- Wash clothes in cold water and hang them to dry to prolong their life.
- Mend clothes. Learn to sew, darn, and knit.
- Turn old clothes into something useful.
- When there's no more life left in clothes, compost those made from natural fibers. I use worn-out, 100% natural fiber clothes and bedding for sheet mulching in my garden. Smaller pieces of cloth I put into my compost.

THE ZERO WASTE CHILD

- Use cotton diapers and wipes.
- Make diaper spray to use with cloth wipes.
- Provide kids with secondhand, handmade, or natural toys.
- Give kids "loose parts," such as household and natural objects, for play.
- Use thrifted baskets to corral toys.
- Dress in secondhand clothes.
- Borrow or buy secondhand sporting equipment.
- Accept and pass-on hand-me-downs.
- Limit your children's belongings.
- Give less at birthdays, Christmas, and other holidays.
- Create a natural art cupboard.
- Borrow books from the library.
- Shop your home and thrift stores for school supplies.
- Pack zero-waste lunches and reusable water bottles.
- Set an example for your children.
- Regardless of your children's age, it's never too late to start a zero-waste life.
- Immerse your children in nature daily.
- Establish family values that prioritize a reverence to our natural world.

THE ZERO WASTE HOME OFFICE

- Stop junk mail.
 - Deal with junk mail as soon as it comes in the door.
 - Call companies directly to be removed from their mailing list.
 - CatalogChoice (<https://www.catalogchoice.org/>) is a free service to help reduce your junk mail.
 - DMAchoice (<https://www.dmachoice.org/>) allows you to opt out of direct mail and email. This service costs around two dollars.
 - OptOutPrescreen.com (<https://www.optoutprescreen.com/>) allows you to opt out of credit card and insurance offers. You do have to provide your social security number, but it is a safe and legitimate service.
 - When you place an online order, in the comment box request that your information not be added to the company mailing list.
 - Be persistent, as sometimes it takes several tries and approaches to be removed from a mailing list.
- Choose paperless billing.
- Use recycled printer paper and print mindfully.
- Print on both sides of a paper before recycling.
- Use scrap paper for note taking and list making.
- Save and reuse blank envelopes that come with bills or junk mail.
- Shop your home or thrift store for office supplies.
- Make cards and stationery from materials already on hand, for example kid's artwork and reused greeting cards.
- Use shredded paper in your compost. Avoid shredding glossy or highly inked paper or paper envelopes with plastic windows.
- Replace plastic tape with paper masking tape.

CLEANING AND CARING FOR YOUR ZERO WASTE HOME

- Maintain a consistent home cleaning and maintenance schedule.
- Repair items as needed.
- Use up the cleaning products and tools you already have on hand.
- Make homemade cleaners.
- Choose powdered detergent packaged in a cardboard box or from bulk.
- Use wool dryer balls in place of dryer sheets
- Use bar soap or refill liquid dish soap where bulk shopping is available
- Use cleaning tools made from natural materials.
 - Brushes with wood handles and natural bristles
 - Natural fiber rags and scrubbers
 - Cellulose pop-up sponges or Swedish dishcloths
 - Stainless steel or copper scrubbers
 - Old toothbrushes
- Avoid buying plastic trash bags to line your trash can. Instead, use:
 - Plastic or paper bags that you already have in your home
 - Newspaper
 - No liner

Natural Household Cleaners

I do most of my household cleaning using three ingredients: baking soda, white distilled vinegar, and castile soap. I don't generally follow recipes, but below are some guidelines. I like to add herbal tea or infused vinegar for fragrance and disinfectant properties to these recipes. I have infused vinegar with orange peels, rosemary, and lavender. I often replace some of the water in the below recipes with a tea made with mint, rosemary, lavender, pine needles, etc.

All-purpose Spray

This recipe is safe on natural stone and concrete surfaces.

1 teaspoon castile soap
¼ cup herbal tea, *optional*
Water, to fill

In an empty spray bottle add castile soap, herbal tea, and fill with water. Recap spray bottle and gently shake.

Glass, Mirror, and Disinfectant Cleaner

This solution works on glass, mirrors, and non-stone surfaces, such as toilet seats. Vinegar solutions can cause damage to stone and concrete surfaces.

1-part white distilled vinegar
1-part water
1 drop castile soap

In a spray bottle, fill half full of vinegar, top with water, and add a drop of castile soap. Recap spray bottle and gently shake.

Scouring Powder

I use a thrifted glass parmesan shaker to dispense baking soda.

Baking soda
Castile soap, *optional*

Baking soda works well on its own as a scouring powder. For additional cleaning powder, sprinkle your tub or sink with baking soda and scrub with a wet sponge which you have added a drop or two of castile soap.

Toilet Bowl Cleaner

Baking soda
White distilled vinegar

Sprinkle toilet bowl with about a quarter cup of baking soda. Pour in a glug of vinegar. Scrub and allow to sit for five minutes or more. Take one more pass at scrubbing and flush.

Floors

Water
White distilled vinegar, *eliminate on natural stone or concrete floors*
Castile soap

Add in a glug of vinegar (only on non-stone floors) and a drop or two of castile soap to your mop bucket. Fill with water and swish ingredients.

Wood Butter

Fractionated coconut oil does not go rancid, making it safe for wooden spoons, cutting boards, and butcher blocks. This recipe is not appropriate for people with a coconut allergy.

1 cup fractionated coconut oil
1 oz beeswax

Heat oil and wax in a tempered glass or metal container set over simmering water. When the wax melts, stir gently and pour into a jar. Let cool on the counter. Store in a cool place. To condition wood, rub a thin layer into the wood. If necessary, buff with a clean, soft cloth.

ZERO WASTE HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS

Gift Giving

Gift-giving can be tricky to navigate, especially with family and friends that do not follow a zero-waste lifestyle. I like to honor the recipient in my choice of the gift while maintaining my zero-waste values in my selection. I ask three questions when choosing a gift.

1. Will the gift be meaningful in a lasting way to the recipient?
2. Were the people involved in producing the gift treated fairly, both in pay and working conditions?
3. Is the gift made from natural materials and produced, packaged, and distributed in a way that respects our planet's resources and vitality?

While it's not always possible to meet all three points, I do my best to give with thought.

Gift Wrap

- Stop buying gift wrap, ribbons, and plastic tape.
- Use up what you already have in your home.
- Gift wrap ideas:
 - Newspaper
 - Brown paper bags
 - Packaging paper
 - Old maps
 - Old sheet music
 - Bandanas, scarves, and other fabric
 - Toilet paper rolls
 - Jars
 - Yarn, string, and twine already in your home
 - Ribbons made from strips of old fabric
 - No tape or paper tape to replace plastic tape

Zero Waste Celebrations

- Decorate with what you have: food, plants, objects found in nature, things you already own, borrow or purchase secondhand.
- Borrow or thrift dishes and flatware.
- Buy candles at the thrift store or purchase beeswax candles, rather than soy or petroleum-based candles.
 - Beeswax is renewable and all-natural (soy has added paraffin and hardeners).
 - Beeswax is clean and long burning.
 - Beeswax gives a warm light and a honey/floral scent without added fragrance.
- Use cloth napkins: borrow, buy secondhand, or cut up an old sheet or tablecloth.
- Serve beverages, such as beer, hard cider, or kombucha, that you can buy and fill locally using your bottles or growlers.
- Fill your containers at the olive and salad bar at your local grocery store.
- Serve popcorn and other zero-waste snacks.
- Skip the plastic water bottles and serve tap water. For a special touch, add lemon or cucumber slices, fresh mint, or other herbs or fruit.

RESOURCES

There are many books and online resources available to support and inspire a zero-waste lifestyle. Below are a few of my favorites that have inspired me along the way.

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ABOUT ME

I am a mother to three and live with my husband and youngest child in the mountains near Bozeman, Montana. Professionally, I co-own and operate a nutrition consulting company that my business partner and I founded in 2004. When not working, you can find me in the wilderness or immersed in any number of homemaking projects. I believe less is more, and life is beautiful when we live in harmony with nature.

Please reach out to me with your zero-waste questions and stories at juliefathy@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you!