

Talking Trash: Just say no

Newton has not yet considered banning plastic bags, but many other US cities are discussing following San Francisco's example and doing this, including Boston. Consumers and some retailers are starting to get the message. Food markets are selling reusable bags for nominal fees, and many shoppers are now routinely carrying their own reusable bags. When cashiers ask "Do you want a bag?" (rather than "paper or plastic?"), more and more people can now "just say no".

But we still have a long way to go. The billions of plastic bags we use every year in the US, almost all of them made of petroleum, continue to create serious environmental problems. Biodegradable bags made of plant material are not widely available. Only a small fraction of plastic bags are recycled, and they mainly end up in landfills or get scattered across the landscape and in our oceans, where they kill large numbers of sea mammals and sea birds, usually because they ingest the plastic.

And speaking of recycling, Newton residents are beginning to learn about "Pay as you throw" (PAYT) approaches to solid waste collection, which has the potential to improve our recycling program significantly. Read Michele Davis' article about it in the current edition of Green News: www.greendecade.org/download/GreenNews_GD.News7-8.07.pdf.

For recycling information, see: www.ci.newton.ma.us/dpw/recycling, 617-796-1000. To swap, donate or sell unwanted items and keep them out of the waste stream, see: wastenotnewton.com.

Newton Angino Community Farm



"Newton Community Farm has increased its public exposure this year, by operating a booth at both Newton Farmers markets. More Newton residents are having an opportunity to taste the farm's incredibly fresh and delicious produce.

The farm workers at the markets are often asked: Are you organic? Greg Maslowe, the farmer at Newton Community Farm, replies to this question by engaging in an "educational moment". He knows that the question behind the question "Are you organic?" is usually "Do you use pesticides?", and he suggests that consumers visit the National Organic Program (NOP) website, where they will see a long list of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, rodenticides, and chemical fertilizers allowed for use on organic farms. The designation "organic" does not necessarily mean that the grower eschews the use of pesticides.

Newton Community Farm is not certified organic by the USDA, but Greg knows that organic farming offers huge improvements over conventional agriculture. In fact, the farm does not use pesticides, or chemical fertilizers, and it makes its own compost. However, like many small farmers who bring their produce to local farmers markets, Greg feels that the USDA may not have the best interests of the soil, farmers, consumers, and the world in mind by limiting the use of the "organic" label solely to those certified by that federal agency.

Consumers should not place undue emphasis on the USDA label, as there are compelling reasons why many local farmers have not applied for certification. One reason is that the process of certification has preconditions, such as requiring that a farmer's fields be taken out of use for a span of years, an impossible financial burden for farmers with low income and a limited amount of space to farm.

Buying local provides many advantages to consumers. The food is extremely fresh, usually picked the day it is sold, and has not yet lost any nutritional value. Consumers can talk to the farmer and ask questions. They can also visit the farm and observe the farming practices. They can judge for themselves if a farmer's operations are sustainable, healthy and ethical.

The farm stand is open Tuesday-Friday 3-7 p.m., and Saturdays 10 a.m. - noon. See: www.newtoncommunityfarm.org to learn about volunteering, educational programs and public events. Sign up for the farm newsletter by sending an email to newtoncommunityfarm@comcast.net.

Charles River Watershed

The Charles River Basin has been off-limits to swimmers for half a century, but on July 21, 2007, 69 swimmers participated in the first Charles River One Mile Swim, in front of the Hatch Shell. This historic event demonstrated how far we have come in cleaning up this beautiful 80-mile long river that winds through Newton and empties into Boston Harbor, defining the greater Boston landscape for residents of the area and millions of visitors. There are more and more opportunities to access the river in small boats, to fish and to walk or bike along the banks.

Songwriters, sharpen your pencils: how about "Love that Clean Water"?

Learn about the ecological health of the Charles River at www.crwa.org.

Safer, energy-saving Alternatives

Newton residents, like most Americans, often purchase water in plastic bottles...then discard the bottles. There are many reasons people should be encouraged not to do this. Although many people are recycling these bottles, how much better it is to prevent them from being manufactured in the first place. After all, those plastics are made from petroleum. There is ample documentation that the quality of water in those bottles is not superior, and is sometimes inferior, to the pure water provided in the tap by our metropolitan water agency, MWRA. Try a blind taste test with your "favorite" bottled water, if you need convincing. Then start getting in the habit of refilling one of those plastic bottles with tap water, over and over again; if you like your water cold, chill it in the refrigerator.

You can even add a twist.

Human (and Animal) Ingenuity: biomimicry

"Researchers at Northwestern University led by Phillip B. Messersmith, a professor of biomedical engineering, have made a small piece of adhesive, about two square millimeters, that mimics the structure of the gecko foot and then coated it with a polymer inspired by mussel glue. While other researchers have made gecko-inspired adhesives, this is the first that adheres well when wet, which could make it useful for bandages and underwater robots.

"Under wet conditions, our adhesive is equally as adhesive as a gecko foot is under dry conditions," Dr. Messersmith said. The researchers describe their invention, which they have named "geckel," in the current issue of the journal Nature."

Kenneth Chang
NYTimes, 7/24/07
**Design by Gecko, Plus Glue by Mussel,
Yields a Powerful Adhesive**