

Packaging guide for businesses



Alternatives to plastics made from mineral oil

Plastics can be made from fossil fuels and plants, so strictly speaking this campaign is to avoid the use of mineral oil-based plastic bags. But it's also about all the other packaging we use, so this is a list of various consumables businesses might use, from bags to catering supplies.

The ideal is to use reduce the amount of packaging (including plastic bags) used by reducing demand for packaging, and by using reusable bags. But in cases where single use items must be used, we have listed sustainable alternatives.

Just because a product is not plastic (or oil-based plastic) does not automatically make it ecologically and socially acceptable. Some alternatives to oil-based plastics are not quite as sustainable as some companies might claim, so we have really scrutinised each supplier to compile a list of the best.

We are not recommending any suppliers in particular, merely pointing you in their direction. Please also note that we are not recommending every product each company supplies, but saying that there will be *at least one* sustainable product supplied by each company.

Labels

Labelling is important for packaging; labels now exist that are compostable, made from plant-based materials and use non-toxic glues.

[Biotak](#)

Jute bags

Jute is the world's second most important fibre (after cotton) and is produced in Asian countries. It is particularly hard-wearing and jute bags should last many years. Production of jute is generally not linked to high levels of agro-chemical use.

[Canby](#)

[Jute EXPO](#)

[Midpac](#)

[Natural Bag Co.](#)

[Only fair](#)

[Supreme creations](#)



Cotton bags

Cotton makes great bags that are quite hard wearing and fit comfortably in the hand. But there are some major pitfalls with chemically-grown cotton. Much cotton is now Genetically Modified (GM) - it is impossible to tell what cotton is not GM. Non-organic cotton consumes vast amounts of water and, whilst occupying just 2.5% of the world's agricultural land, uses 11% of all pesticides and 25% of all insecticides.

The only sustainable cotton bags are those made from organic cotton. Check that products are officially certified as organic.

[Bags 2 Keep](#)

[Biopac](#)
[Bishopston Trading Co](#)
[Eco Noiz](#)
[Ethical superstore](#)
[Supreme creations](#)
[Terramar organics](#)
[Turtle bags](#)



Hemp

Hemp is the ultimately sustainable annual crop, requiring very few agro-chemicals to grow. It is hard wearing and now very fashionable.

[Downbound](#)
[Hemp world](#)
[Sativa bags](#)
[The Hemp Shop](#)



Willow baskets

Willow is the original sustainable material that grows very well in Britain. Willow baskets will last for many years and there are lots of designs to choose from.

[British baskets](#)
[Cornish willow](#)
[English willow baskets](#)
[Jonathan Gordon](#)
[Ray Youdale](#)
[Somerset willow company](#)
[Sue Kirk Willow baskets](#)



Plant-based-plastic bags

Plastics can be made from plant materials but, as with cotton, there are many ethical and ecological issues surrounding their production. Most biodegradable and compostable bags are made from corn starch, which is mostly from GM maize - which is effectively "GM through the back door". Ensure products are specifically labelled "non-GM" or "GM free".

[BioBags](#)
[Polymail plastics](#)
[Polypostal packaging](#)



Paper bags

Paper bags are naturally biodegradable, but bags made from virgin wood pulp is unacceptable. Ensure bags are made from recycled paper and unbleached (i.e. brown paper) – bleaches are associated with serious environmental pollution and consumption of vast quantities of water.

[Big brown carrier bag](#)
[Dempson products](#)
[London bio packaging](#)
[Ryepac](#)



Catering supplies

There are many plant-based catering supplies, such as disposable plates, cutlery, cups and napkins. Ensure corn starch is GM-free, paper is recycled and ideally all products are compostable.

[Biopac](#)

[Easi pac](#)

[Eco go](#)

[London bio packaging](#)

[Packaging environmental](#)

[Potatopak Ltd](#)

[Ripple cups](#)

[Vegware](#)



ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Social issues

Has the product been produced under ethical conditions? Look for Fairtrade certification for products made outside the EU, which is a guarantee that the producer is paid a fair price for their goods, and that the employer supports a number of other social issues.

As a minimum, for products manufactured in countries outside Britain, check whether the company discusses ethical treatment of its' employees and suppliers. Arguably, any product made in China is not ethical because of the repressive regime..



Ecological

How have the products been transported? For example, some jute bags are air freighted from India, where they could easily be shipped. The carbon footprint of any air freighted product will be enormous and is unacceptable. Air freight creates around 180 times higher carbon emissions (per kg) than transporting the same distance by ship.

Other materials

Plastic linings and solvents can be an issue in some products, making them unsustainable and not fully biodegradable.

Manufacturer's commitment

Are the company committed to the ethics behind their products? If so, they will be likely to be looking for the highest ecological and social credentials in the products they sell. Some companies sell a few sustainable products, but other companies are actually sustainable to the core.

Sustainability of bioplastics

This is, understandably, a grey area for many people. There are many issues to consider and this can become confusing – bioplastics are big business now and so, like anything, their integrity becomes watered down as some businesses produce them for just profit rather than ethical reasons.

The ethics of bioplastics are actually quite simple and involve two parts. Firstly, what is the bioplastic made from? If it contains any Genetically Modified (GM) plant materials that is from an unsustainable agricultural system. Ensure the product is specifically labelled as “GM free” or

“non-GM”.

Secondly, how does the product break down? If you put any bioplastic on the compost heap they won't all break down, because of the way they're manufactured. There are five ways plastics break down:

- Biodegradable – by micro-organisms (designed for landfill)
- Photodegradable – in sunlight
- Hydrodegradable – in water
- Oxodegradable – in air
- Compostable – in home or commercial compost heaps

The only sustainable method is Compostable, because it takes plastic out of the landfill/incineration waste stream, it creates a useful product and it will end up as an organic compound (i.e. Not tiny pieces of plastic as with photo, oxo, or hydro-degradable).

Look out for these symbols:



It's a common misconception that “biodegradable” on packaging is a good thing – the only thing it means is it will break down in to CO₂ and H₂O in a landfill site; this is different from being sustainable!

This table summarises these points:

Level of sustainability	Material made from	How breaks down
High	GM-free plant-based bioplastics (corn, potato, cassava, sugarcane)	Compostable
Medium	GM-free plant-based bioplastics (corn, potato, cassava, sugarcane)	Biodegradable
Unsustainable	GM plant-based bioplastics	Biodegradable

FURTHER INFORMATION

These are good sources of further information:

[Modbury, Britain's first plastic bag free town](#) – masses of information about the problems of plastic and all associated issues

[Fairtrade foundation](#) – explains about Fairtrade certification

[Terramar organics](#) – about cotton production (organic and non-organic)

[Wikipedia](#) – about jute

[Yaoh](#) – about hemp