Why, How, Wow!

Plastic Free Yard Ideas

Plus, how micro-plastics from clothes find their way to forests

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Why? Microplastics everywhere

All of a sudden, scientists are finding microplastics everywhere—in our bodies, in organic vegetables, and even in remote forests.

They drift in through the air, settle onto leaves high in the canopy, and slowly make their way down to the forest floor. Over time, they build up in the soil, turning forests into hidden storage sites for plastic pollution. … To understand how this buildup happens, researchers studied several forest sites in Germany. … Using advanced measurement techniques, they traced how much plastic had accumulated and where it came from. … Their findings suggest that forests have been collecting airborne plastic since at least the 1950s.—earth.com

Although these plastic bits have been building in us and our environments for decades, little is known about their impact on us and the ecosystems we inhabit. Nor is much known about the PFAs ("forever chemicals") used to make plastics resistant to heat, oil, stains, grease, and water, but what is known is deeply frightening.

While less than 1 percent of the 12,000 or so PFAS compounds have been tested for toxicity, the (abbreviated) list of maladies linked to them, even at tiny concentrations, includes decreased fertility, pregnancy complications, weakened immune systems, kidney and testicular cancers, liver damage, obesity, and hormone interference, according to a review of the scientific literature by the Environmental Protection Agency. Infant deaths tripled for mothers living downstream from PFAS-contaminated water, a 2025 study found.—The Washington Post [gift link]

The solutions to microplastic and PFA pollution will be big and systemic—like plastic-eating bacteria, plant-based plastics, and large-scale PFA filters. But while scientists develop these, I'm trying to decrease my use of plastic, especially with respect to sources of microplastics, both to lessen my personal impact and to send a message to manufacturers that consumers don't want plastic. I've found the easiest way to do this is to stop buying synthetic textiles.

Fleece jackets, yoga pants, polyester shirts, nylon leggings, microfiber cloths, and other synthetic textiles are the largest source of microplastics. For me, it's easy to limit my new clothing to wool, linen, cotton, silk, and rayon/viscose (sometimes with a bit of synthetic for stretch). I'm also looking into washing machine filters, because a single wash of synthetic clothing can release hundreds of thousands of fibers. (Please let me know in the comments if you've done the research and can recommend a filter.)

How: Reducing plastic in the yard

Contemporary landscaping involves a lot of plastic, too. Here's how I'm trying to avoid introducing them into my yard:

- Recycling plastic nursery pots or giving them to a small nursery that will reuse them.

- Not buying bags of soil, fertilizer, or other amendments. (If you missed it, read Why the World Needs "Bad" Soil.)
- Never using landscape fabric, which doesn't work anyway. (Read Cass Marketos' On the Problem of Landscape Tarp.)
- Favoring wood and metal patio furniture. Keep in mind that vinyl, acrylic (used to make Sunbrella), and polyester filling are all forms of plastic. So is much outdoor furniture marketed as "rope" or "rattan."
- Stopping solarizing with plastic.
- Banning plastic edging and vinyl fencing.
- Choosing tools made of wood and/or metal whenever possible.