

It seems as if every day a new green term surfaces in some Instagram ad or on the packaging of a product you wouldn't expect. So often we find ourselves looking at sustainable-sounding copy without much clarity about the meaning of the words. While we can't be sure that everything is as good for the earth as it claims to be, we can educate ourselves a bit more on the green lexicon to help make sense of everything that's out there. Become familiar with this glossary of 46 sustainable key words to shop smarter, consume more mindfully, and feel more in control of where your money goes.

biodegradable: Something capable of decaying into its basic components.

biodiesel: A renewable fuel for diesel engines derived from natural oils such as soybean

biomass: Plant or animal materials used to create energy.

biophilia: A love of life, living, and affinity for living things.

byproduct: Excess material produced.

carbon emissions: Pollution released into the atmosphere from carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide; often produced by motor vehicles.

carbon footprint: The amount of carbon dioxide produced by your lifestyle.

carbon offsets: Monetary purchase to counter the amount of carbon emitted into the atmosphere rather than reducing carbon use.

circular economy: A system dedicated to eliminating waste by reusing, sharing, repairing, and recycling resources.

climate change: Significant change in climate including temperature, precipitation, or wind that lasts for an extended period.

climate positive: Exceeding achieving carbon neutrality by removing additional carbon dioxide from the atmosphere; also referred to as carbon negative.

closed-loop: A system where everything is recycled and reused.

composting: Controlled decomposition of organic material.

conservation: Protection from harm.

deforestation: Conversion of forested lands into non-forest use.

eco-conscious: The mentality to focus on reducing harm to the environment wherever possible.

eco-friendly: Environmentally minded actions that cause minimal harm to the earth.

ecological footprint: Measurement based on the amount of nature it takes to support something.

energy efficient: Uses the smallest amount of energy possible to provide power.

environmental impact: The effect something has on the environment.

fair trade: Principles of fair treatment, wages, and safe working conditions for workers.

freecycle: Exchanging goods to extend their lifecycle and keep reusable items out of landfills.

global warming: The average increase of temperature of the troposphere.

gray water: Domestic wastewater including wash water from the bathroom, kitchen, and laundry.

green: Term used to describe behavior, product, policies, people, etc. that minimize environmental damage.

greenhouse effect: When excessive heat is trapped and built up in the troposphere by a blanket of gases.

greenhouse gas: Gas in the atmosphere such as methane, water vapor, carbon dioxide.

greenwashing: Misrepresenting something as being “green” when it’s not environmentally sound.

localvore: Someone who consumes only food that has been cultivated locally.

naked packaging: Products that are sold without packaging.

natural resources: Raw materials supplied by nature.

net-zero: Achieving a balance between emissions produced and emissions removed from the atmosphere; also known as carbon neutrality.

organic: Anything that was once a living organism.

post-consumer: Previously used by consumers before being reprocessed into a new product.

preservation: To keep something the same and prevent it from being damaged.

reclaimed: Waste materials refurbished for new products.

recycle: To reprocess reusable goods.

reduce: To cut back on harmful habits that produce waste.

reforestation: Planting of forests on lands that were depleted.

remineralize: To restore mineral content to an environment.

renewable energy: Electricity from replenishable sources such as geothermal, hydropower, solar, and wind.

single-use: Items used one time and then discarded.

sustainability: Environmental practices that protect natural resources needed by future generations for a positive quality of life.

vegan: A diet and lifestyle that avoids all animal-derived products.

wish-cycling: An aspirational approach to recycling items without knowing if they're recyclable but expecting them to be properly dealt with.

zero-waste: Avoiding products that create waste to avoid contributing to landfills, incinerators, and waste discarded in nature. Minimal waste is a more realistic term, as it's impossible to create zero waste.