

What happens to the rubbish?

by Isabel Carter

PILES OF SCRAPS of plastic, old batteries, paper wrappers and empty drink cans... Rubbish is a problem all around the world. Large cities and developed countries have rubbish collection schemes. In the rural areas of most countries this is usually lacking. Wherever people go, they tend to leave rubbish behind – even on the moon!

Years ago rubbish was much less of a problem. Food and goods were wrapped in natural materials – banana and other leaves, occasionally newspaper. Gourds and clay pots were used instead of bottles. These materials would quickly decay and be absorbed into the soil. Today much of what is available to us comes wrapped in plastic, in tin cans or plastic bottles. These materials are strong, light and cheap to manufacture. But they take a long time to break down – in some cases a very long time indeed.

Much of our rubbish can be recycled and reused. Many people earn a living from recycling the rubbish tips in large cities. But there is always material left which has no further use. How long does our rubbish take to decay and disappear? Some of the answers will horrify you. This information may help people to consider carefully the problem of rubbish.

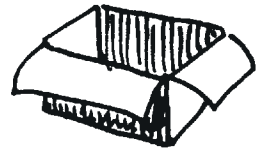
- How much of what we buy has unnecessary wrapping?
- How can we help to recycle and reuse material?
- How can we dispose of rubbish safely?
- Should we refuse to buy products in certain packaging? Some countries make the manufacturers responsible for disposing of the packaging.

Together we can try to make our surroundings more pleasant places.



Newspaper

Usually takes just a few weeks to decay.



Cardboard boxes

These can take several months to decay.



Leather shoes

The soles can take up to 50 years to decay.



Thin plastic

Plastic food wrappings – as used for biscuits and crisps – can take up to 5 years to decay.



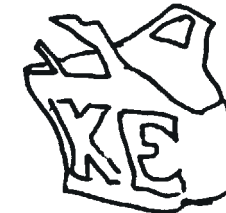
Banana leaves

These and other leaves used for wrapping and serving food usually take just a few weeks to decay. Make compost from all waste vegetable material.



Tyres

Many uses, so are rarely seen as rubbish – however they take so long to break down that no figure is yet available.



Plastic bags

The plastic used for bread bags and carrier bags takes 10–20 years to decay.



Scrap metals

May take up to 50 years to decay, depending on the metal.



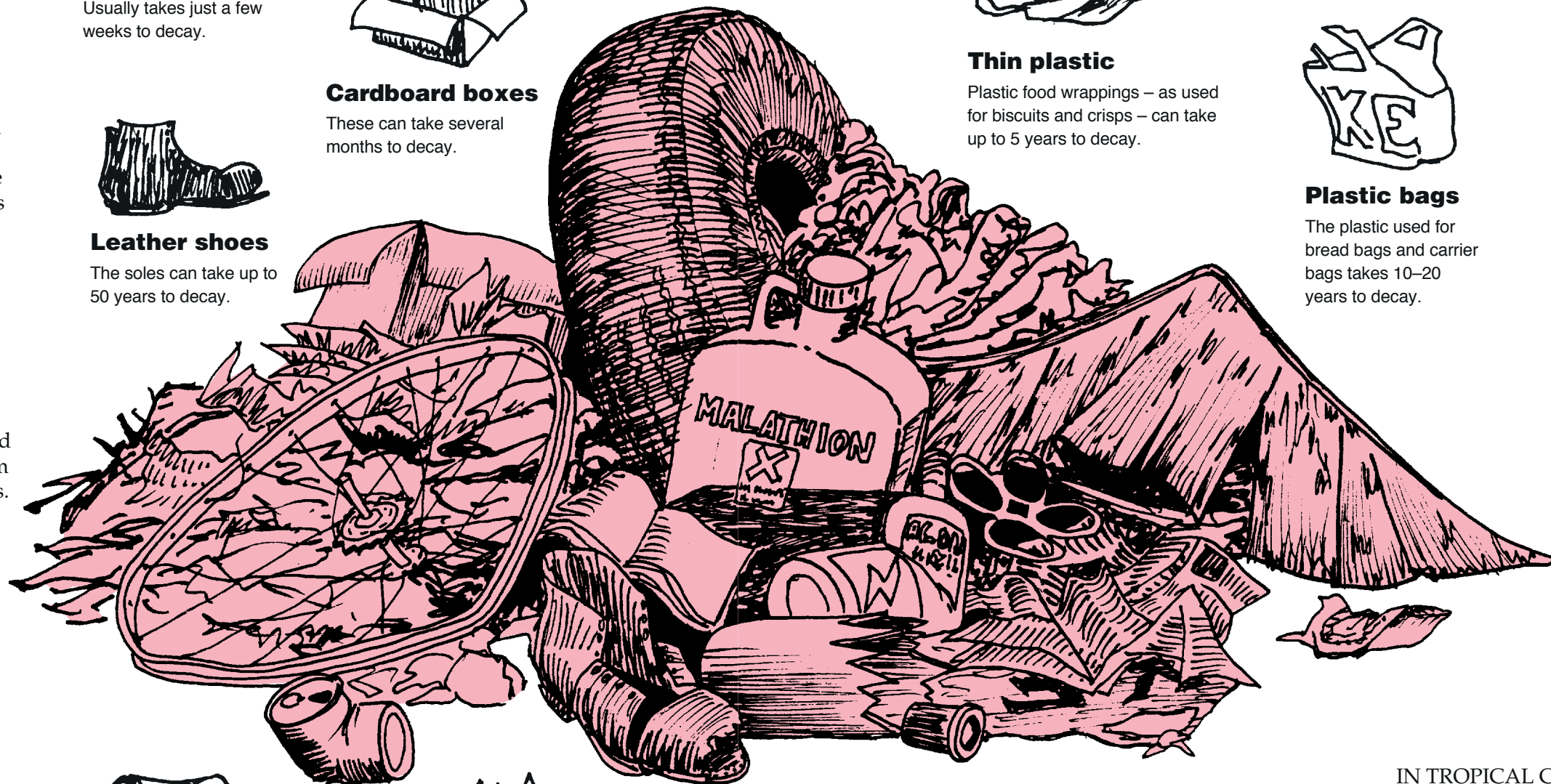
Plastic rings

The sort which hold beer and other drink cans together can take up to 100 years to decay.



Plastic bottles

Most kinds of plastic bottles will last indefinitely. Fortunately, scientists are developing new kinds of plastic which will eventually break down in sunlight.



Aluminium drink cans

These can take up to 80 years to decay. Try using them and other tin cans as pots for tree seedlings.



Glass bottles

Usually reused or recycled. However, once broken, they take up to one million years to decay – they erode like rock.



Pesticide containers

These need special mention because they are so dangerous. They should never be left lying about, cleaned in rivers for reuse, or burned. Always dispose of them in special rubbish pits. Old batteries also contain dangerous chemicals. Dispose of them in the same way.

IN TROPICAL CONDITIONS there may be great variation in the length of time materials take to decay. If rubbish is wet and exposed to strong sunlight it will decay more quickly. The presence of termites will also significantly speed up the decay of vegetable, paper and cardboard rubbish.

With special thanks to the Marine Conservation Society, Ross on Wye; and Ynyslas Information Centre, Countryside Council for Wales, Aberystwyth, for their help in providing this information.