

help wanted

Straight answers to
scratch-your-head questions.

how bad is it...



...to release helium balloons into the air?

Hold on tight to that string. While it's believed some balloons shatter into tiny pieces when they reach a certain height in the atmosphere, "many others will float back to the land or water," says Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist at the Natural Resources Defense Council. Latex balloons can take several years to biodegrade, and Mylar balloons never do. What doesn't end up in a landfill can harm animals (marine life included), who could mistake pieces of balloons for food—and die if they eat them. So pop and toss balloons at your party's end.

super bad! 😞

help wanted *how bad is it...*



...to not water flowers right after planting them?

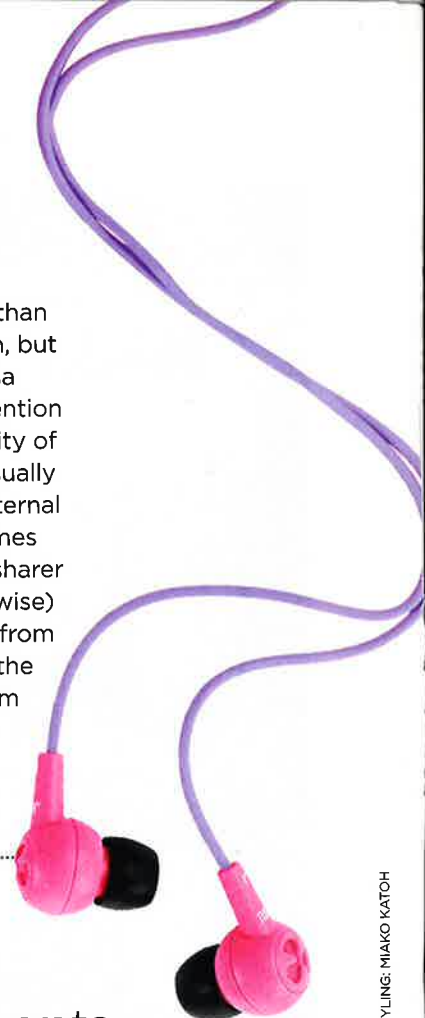
If you want healthy, bloom-packed plants, don't deny them H₂O, especially when you first put them in the ground. When a bulb or seedling goes into dry dirt, any moisture that's inside the root ball will be sucked up by the surrounding soil. And bone-dry roots mean dead plants, says L.A. landscape designer Shirley Bovshow. "All freshly planted flowers need at least a month of regular watering to establish themselves," she says. Saturate the buds and the ground around a plant's roots right after planting, then check the soil every few days. If you dig your finger into the soil and it doesn't feel damp a few inches below the surface, water again.

really bad! 😞

...to borrow or lend earbuds?

Sharing earbuds sounds grosser than it is. "Yes, bacteria live on ear skin, but they're mostly harmless," says Lisa Sturm, director of Infection Prevention and Epidemiology at the University of Michigan Health System. "Ears usually don't get viral infections from external factors like earbuds." The only times to avoid swapping: if you or the sharer has a skin infection (ear or otherwise) or a suppressed immune system from something like chemotherapy. If the buds look dirty or waxy, give them a quick cleaning with an alcohol wipe before sharing.

not so bad! 😊



...to toss bank statements without shredding them?

You could be throwing away your personal security. Identity thieves often go through trash as an easy way to steal information, says David Bach, vice chairman of Edelman Financial Services, a national financial planning firm. Luckily it's simple to keep your personal info secret. "Shred anything with your name, address, and any financial details before throwing it away," Bach advises. That includes bank statements, receipts, and credit card offers. "It's easy for someone to fill one out, then intercept your mail to get the credit card," says Bach. There's no need to spring for a high-tech shredder, though. Just rip statements into four pieces, then toss them in two trash cans.

super bad! 😞



...to **wrap up an umbrella** while it's still wet?

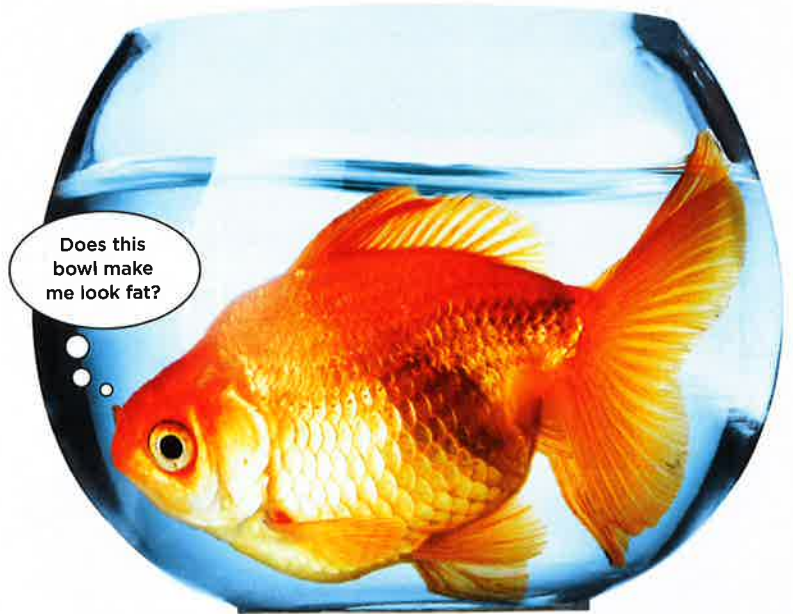
Don't worry too much about folding and stashing a drippy umbrella. "While it's generally not a good idea to trap water in anything you wrap up, umbrellas are made of water-repellent fabric that won't mold or mildew," says Ann Headley, director of design and innovation at Totes. The only time you may run into trouble is if you're using a cheapie drugstore buy, as some have a metal frame that can rust. Spring for a plated steel, aluminum, or fiberglass frame instead. Giving your umbrella a quick shake after you come in from the rain can help it stay in shape too.

not so bad! 😊

...to **pretreat a stain, then not wash it** right away?

Yes, you want to act quickly to get a sauce splatter out of a shirt. But if you don't have time to wash or at least rinse it right after pretreating, hold off. When stain-blasting products are left on for longer than the time recommended on the label, they can discolor fabric, says Clorox senior scientist Mary Gagliardi, a.k.a. Dr. Laundry. That's why you should always follow the pretreater's guidelines—which typically advise letting the product sit for five to 10 minutes, then washing. If you want to get a jump-start on a stain and you're not near your washer, dab at the spot with liquid dish soap, then rinse.

pretty bad! 😞



...to **overfeed your pet fish?**

Whatever food Goldie doesn't eat will end up drifting around her bowl or aquarium. If those leftovers aren't promptly cleaned out, when they decompose, they'll release toxins, such as ammonia, into the water. This can cause water quality to go south quickly, which could sicken or even kill your fish, says Bill Wymard, a marine biologist at Aquarium Adventure, an aquatic store in Columbus, OH. To ensure that you're giving your finned friend the right serving size, follow these steps two times a day: Over a few minutes, place tiny pinches of food into the bowl, pausing to make sure everything is eaten before adding more. The flakes shouldn't make it to the bottom of the bowl. If they do, you're dishing out too much.

really bad! 😞

