Uni students push for use of green starch bags

Made of tapioca flour, the bags are biodegradable and safe if eaten by animals

Samantha Boh

Tired of seeing Singapore’s waterways clogged up by plastic bags, and equally weary of their growing pile of reusable bags, two undergraduates from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) have banded together to try to convince event organisers and retailers to switch to starch bags.

While they look and feel like plastic bags, starch bags are made from tapioca flour, which makes them biodegradable in both water and soil, said Mr Matthew Ong, 24, a student at the NTU School of Art, Design and Media.

He added that they can also be safely eaten by animals.

“People will argue that everything here is incinerated, but there is still the problem of wind-blown litter,” he said.

“Even if people don’t intentionally litter their plastic bags, the bags may get blown to somewhere inaccessible or into our waterways. But for starch bags, they will dissolve overtime.”

The pair noted that while the use of reusable bags has gained traction, too many of them are given out at events organised here.

For a standard reusable bag made of thick plastic to have a lower carbon footprint than a regular plastic bag made of high-density polyethylene, it must be reused at least 11 times, according to a 2011 study by Britain’s Environment Agency.

Cotton reusable bags have to be reused at least 331 times.

“They are given out way too freely and they cannot be reused (for other events) because there is customised printing on it. What is the point of using reusable bags if it is going to be thrown away after one use,” said Mr Koh, who is studying at the NTU School of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering.

The duo have approached event management companies to offer them starch bags as an alternative. They are offering to customise designs which can be printed on the bags, and have also contacted some retailers.

While it is still early days for the pair, they have already received $10,000 in funding from NTU, under the CoLab4Good Fund, which helps fund ground-up community projects.

The NTU Office of Admissions and Financial Aid has also pledged to use the bags, instead of reusable bags, for future events.

Professor William Chen, director of NTU’s Food Science and Technology Programme, said this is part of efforts to educate prospective applicants on the application of food science and the importance of sustainability.

The bags will be used in the fairs organised in NTU as well as those at junior colleges and polytechnics.

Mr Eugene Heng, founder and chairman of Waterways Watch Society, said it will be an uphill task to convince people to switch from plastic bags to starch bags, and that the pair will also face competition from producers of reusable bags.

The cost of a starch bag is more than two times that of a plastic bag.

“The intent is commendable and honourable. If you cannot eradicate the use of plastic bags overnight, then better to give people environmentally friendly options,” he said.

Green Boulevard founders Jacob Koh (left) and Matthew Ong are trying to convince event organisers and retailers to switch to starch bags.

Photo: DCS VINOD JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

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