

What NOT to Put in the Bin

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Ever wondered if that cryptic greasy paper plate could go in your recycling bin? Or would it really be a big deal if you threw in just one plastic bag?

It may seem simple to determine what doesn't go in a recycling bin because of the labels, but unfortunately, it's not that straightforward.

So, where do you begin to find out of the specific materials that shouldn't go in a recycling bin? Listed below are some materials that you can pretty much guarantee should be kept out of your community's recycling bins (unless of course the bin or the program specifically says that you can drop it in).

Shredded paper

When you shred paper with a paper shredder, you dramatically decrease the value of the paper because you shorten the length of the paper fiber, which is the source of value of the paper, according Eric Lombardi, the executive director of Eco-Cycle, one of the largest nonprofit recyclers in the U.S.

Nice white computer paper has a long, strong fiber, and every time you recycle that paper, the fiber gets shorter. If done properly, that computer paper can be recycled six to eight times.

However, if you shred that same crisp computer paper, you're lucky if it can even be recycled once. Oftentimes, paper mills won't accept shredded paper because of the difficulties it creates during the sorting process, says Lombardi.

"It gets mixed with everyone's paper that day, and you put it in a giant pile at the recycling facility, there's no way somebody is going to put 'humpty-dumpty' back together again," says Lombardi.

If you have a document that is semi-confidential, rip it by hand three or four times, then throw it into the recycling bin. For documents that absolutely require shredding, locate a source in your area that specifically handles shredded paper for recycling. Some curbside programs may even accept your shredded paper if it is bagged separately.

Brightly colored paper

Believe it or not, bright paper can stop a whole batch of paper from being recycled. The idea behind this one is simple, explains Dan Baril, recycling program manager at the University of Colorado at Boulder, "It's like the red sock in the white load sort-of-syndrome." If you need to buy colored paper, avoid really rich colors, and opt for pastels. Paper mills can usually handle the lighter tones.

Juice boxes and milk cartons

This is a good opportunity to check with your municipality for the best recycling options. Some cities will accept milk and juice cartons for recycling with the paperboard stream. However, this is not true everywhere.

And while Eco-Cycle will accept milk and juice cartons, even with the plastic drinking-spot left in, they do not recycle milk and juice cartons found in non-refrigerated aisles used for packaging products such as soup and soy, rice or almond milk.

Last year, Tropicana and Waste Management launched a national initiative to increase the rate of juice and milk carton recycling. The initiative kicked off the long-term goal to increase beverage carton recycling nationwide, a program being promoted through the [Carton Council](#).

Paper coffee cups

Currently, paper coffee cups (also called hot cups) are accepted for recycling at only few communities in the U.S. The thin polyethylene plastic coating on the cups that helps

prevent liquid leaking has made it difficult for most processing services to recycle the cups.

With about 58 billion paper cups used each year in the U.S., the best thing you can do is simply reduce your usage. Bring along a reusable mug or ask your barista if they offer mugs for serving if you're staying in the store to sip your drink.

“At the end of the day, we wouldn't have a problem with paper hot cups if everyone was going to the coffee shop with their reusable mug,” says Wendell Simonson, marketing-director of Eco-Products, Inc. a Boulder, Colo., based company that sells single-use products that can generally be recycled or composted.

Secondly, if your community offers composting, look for cups made with plant-based coating, which allows the cups to be composted.

Starbucks has a pilot program that is working to prove that hot cups, even with the plastic coating, can be integrated into the cardboard recycling stream.

Pizza boxes, soiled paper plates, napkins

Many people assume that pizza boxes are recyclable. In fact, most boxes have recycling symbols on them and are traditionally made from corrugated cardboard. They are, in and of themselves, recyclable.



Pizza boxes that are tarnished with food, or any paper product that is stained with grease or food, are not recyclable – unless you remove the tainted portions

However, what makes parts of them non-recyclable is the hot, tasty treat that comes inside them, specifically, the grease and cheese from pizza that soil the cardboard.

Food is one of the worst contaminants in the paper recycling process. Grease and oil are not as big of a problem for plastic, metal and glass, as those materials are recycled using a heat process.

But when paper products are recycled, they are mixed with water and turned into a slurry. Since we all know water and oil don't mix, the issue is clear.

Grease from pizza boxes causes oil to form at the top of the slurry, and paper fibers cannot separate from oils during the pulping process.

Essentially, this contaminant causes the entire batch to be ruined. This is the reason that other food related items are non-recyclable (used paper plates, used napkins, used paper towels, etc).

Plastic bags and film

When left to the machines to sort the recyclable materials, "The one that causes the most heartburn is plastic bags," says Lombardi. Plastic bags wrap themselves around the equipment, and as a result, the whole plant may have to shut down – expending time, energy and money. Repairmen often are hired to come in with knives to cut the plastic bags out of the guts of the machinery, Lombardi explains.

But this doesn't mean you have to toss your bags into the trash. The good news is that most grocery stores throughout the U.S. now offer plastic bag recycling. In 2007, more than 830 million pounds of plastic bags and film were recycled nationwide, up 27 percent from 2005. Plastic bags can be made into dozens of new and useful products as well.

The wrong plastic resin

Plastics #1 and #2, made from polyethylene terephthalate (PETE) and high-density polyethylene (HDPE), are the most commonly accepted plastics for recycling. However, just because a plastic is made from HDPE and PETE does not mean that it will be accepted by your community's recycling program. Instead of just focusing on the plastic's number, also look for the specific details provided by your community's program, such as, "narrow-necked bottles" and "rigid plastics."

Even with a recycling program that accepts plastics #1-7, it's often the shape of the plastic product that determines whether or not it can be recycled in that specific program. The most important thing to remember is to check your program and pay attention to the type of plastic you're recycling.

Bottle caps

Polypropylene (PP), or plastic #5, often makes up the plastic caps on bottles. So, what's the big deal if the bottle is a #1 and the cap is a #5? They're both plastic right? It's not that simple.

It all comes down to the melting point, which has a difference of nearly 160 degrees Fahrenheit between the two. If a cap gets mixed in with bottles, the entire batch may be ruined because there is un-melted plastic in the mix.

A general rule of thumb is to remove all of the plastic caps and lids from your plastic bottles, jugs and tubs before recycling them. To check if your city accepts caps for recycling call or visit the Public Works or Department of Sanitation section of its Web site.

If you're in an area where plastic cap recycling is not available, seek out retailers that accept them. Also, a few of companies are taking the lead when it comes to tackling the issue of recycling #5 plastics, such as Aveda.

Broken glass

Broken glass is recyclable, but it might not be reprocessed into new glass bottles. This is because when glass breaks, it can often be a challenge to separate it by color given the tiny pieces.

This glass can be used as an additive in fiberglass, tile and flooring, pavement or even turned back into sand to stop beach depletion. However, just because glass is crushed during recycling doesn't mean you should do this prior to putting it in your bin. This could injure waste haulers or people sorting material at the MRF.

What causes contamination

Knowing what goes in the bin is critical to ensuring the success of the recycling process. That's because recycling actually happens when materials that would otherwise become waste are turned into valuable resources.

Putting the wrong materials into the recycling bin may ruin the entire batch. The material in a recycling container is taken to a material recovery facility (MRF), where the material is separated and processed for selling to companies that buy recycled materials for

making products. The higher the quality of the recycled material, the more the companies will want to buy it, and the higher the price they'll pay for it.

However, when you put materials into the recycling bin that shouldn't be there, you may (at the very least) be slowing down the entire recycling process. Here's what can happen when you put the wrong things in the recycling bin:

- Machines that handle the sorting of the materials can become damaged, which means that precious time, energy and money will be needed to repair the machines.
- If no equipment is available to do the job, more material in the bin that shouldn't be there makes the job far more difficult and inefficient for workers sorting the material by hand.
- Also, it may inhibit the materials in the bin that should be there from turning into the highest quality materials possible, or it could even send everything in the bin straight to the landfill. It may be cliché, but the expression, "one bad apple could spoil the bunch" pretty much sums up the situation.