

Recycling Right

Recycling has come a long way from the bygone days of newspaper and aluminum can drives. It has also become more complicated and challenging now that more items can be recycled and the messaging feels confusing. My hope is that my 30 years of experience in the industry can help shed a little light on the recycling process, provide some quick resources and clear up at least some of the confusion.

Ever wonder why the recycling rules vary between communities or from your home and work? The answer is at the facility that accepts, sorts and markets the materials. Each Material Recovery Facility (MRF) has specific equipment, different markets, and varied levels of allowed contamination. To help explain the process, let's look at a typical household recycling program. You place milk jugs and water bottles, aluminum and tin cans, junk mail and cereal boxes, cardboard boxes, and glass jars in your bin or cart. A collection truck picks up a route of homes and delivers the materials to the MRF. The first step is an inspection of the truckload and if too many wrong items are in the load, it could be rejected and sent to the landfill! While you may be a conscientious recycler, your neighbors could be throwing in plastic bags, styrofoam, food waste, yard waste, and pizza boxes in their recycling containers. Too many of the wrong items can cause the entire truckload to be sent to the landfill. If the load does pass inspection, then the materials are sorted both manually and by machinery into piles of plastics, paper, and metal where they get compressed into bales and shipped off to be made into new materials.

One of the most confusing aspects to recycling is plastic bags! A lot of recycling facilities don't have the equipment to open plastic bags, and the initial inspection process will assume that anything in bags is garbage and a contaminant. But some retailers and a lot of grocery stores can take clean plastic bags because they have a special system to bale and ship those bags off for recycling at a different facility. And you can drop off all sorts of clean plastic at those drop off sites...grocery bags, empty bread bags, the overwrap on water bottles and paper towels, dry cleaning bags, bubble wrap and even plastic shipping envelopes. More information about recycling plastic bags and wraps is available at <http://www.plasticfilmrecycling.org/>.

So what exactly can you recycle? This depends on the contract your community has for recycling materials. Some programs may take all plastics #1 - #5 and others may only take plastics #1 and #2. A quick side note about plastics...those little numbers on the bottom of plastic bottles and tubs that are in the "chasing arrows" refer to type of plastic material and not that it can be recycled. Some programs take glass bottles and jars, and others don't. And over time, as markets fluctuate, communities have to change what can be accepted. Admittedly, it can be hard to keep up with all the rules, but checking with your service provider, facilities manager, or municipality is a good starting point. One helpful resource for some communities is the www.centralfloridarecycles.org website.

Most people want to do the right thing for their community and the environment. When unsure if something can be recycled, it is best to remember *When In Doubt, Throw It Out!*