

Clearing Up Confusion on Plastic Recycling

Have you ever questioned whether you can recycle something (curbside or elsewhere) or if you should put it on the trash?

For example, "Are plastic deodorant sticks, their lids, and their internal parts (assuming they're clean) recyclable in my curbside bin?" These sorts of questions, especially about plastic items, are very common.

The answer to the above question is definitely "No!" Random plastic items - of which there are so many varieties - are often not recyclable.

What makes something recyclable or not?

An item is recyclable only if it (1) can be correctly sorted using current technology at the material recovery facilities (MRFs); **and** (2) has a viable end market - somewhere to send it where they will actually remanufacture the material into new products.

The MRFs, with a combination of human and mechanical sorting systems, are constrained by technology in the materials and shapes they can sort, and that creates some limitation. Then there are the market forces, which is the definitive limitation. If there is no end-market for a particular type of material, then it simply cannot be recycled because there is no one turning it into anything.

What about the numbers on plastic containers?

Confusion about plastic recycling comes largely from that ubiquitous symbol - a number inside the chasing arrows triangle - which manufacturers imprint on plastic products. Because many people believe that the number means it is recyclable - which it does not - a ton of plastic stuff that is not actually recyclable ends up in the recycling bin. The number, which tells you the type of resin an item is made from, does not in fact tell you whether it is recyclable in any given program.



Here are the Rules for recycling plastic:

1. Forget the number!
2. Only recycle CONTAINERS - Bottles, Tubs, Jugs, and Jars - in the curbside recycling cart.
3. If it is not one of the above shapes, then it is not recyclable at the curb.
4. Rinse lightly, only if needed.
5. Put the lids back on the empty containers and pop them in the cart.

Non-Recyclable Plastics

- No plastic bags or flexible plastic packaging. See [Plastic Film Recycling](#) for a drop-off locator.
- No formed/ridged plastic packaging.
- No straws, cups or lids.
- No plastic plates, trays or plastic utensils.
- No candy wrappers, cereal bags, snack bags or chip packets.
- No plastic toys or chairs or shelves.
- No hoses, cables, ropes, or other "tangles".
- No black plastic.
- No empty motor oil, pesticide, or chemical bottles.
- No diapers! Can you believe we have to list this!?
- NO Styrofoam, polystyrene. (UPS stores will reuse clean, bagged and unmixed foam peanuts.)

Why can't these things be recycled?!

1. There are many different kinds of plastic in many different forms, much of which is neither sortable nor marketable.
2. Much of the non-recyclable plastics listed above are such a low grade of plastic that no one is re-manufacturing it.
3. It is cheaper (in our present economy) to make things out of raw material - petroleum, than it is to collect, sort, transport, pelletize and remanufacture all of the various kinds of plastics.

Do Not Let Perfection Become the Enemy of the Good

Yes, recycling is still worth the effort; we just have to get better at "Recycling Right!" You can do it, and your actions do make a difference!

The thing is that we have to recycle as much as we can of the recyclable materials, and let the other stuff go, so as not to let perfection become the enemy of the good!

Please do not put non-recyclable items in the recycling container, clean or otherwise, as that just gives the facilities more sorting to do and the materials inevitably and unavoidably end up in the landfill anyway. Or worse, they slip through and end up as a "contaminate" in the recyclable plastics lowering the quality of the material in the bale. This makes it harder to market and is a major detriment to the recycling industry as a whole.

ReThink

It is up to us as individuals to change our consumerist habits to stop the avalanche of plastics coming down the stream and infiltrating all elements of our environment. The best thing you can do to help is to reduce your use of plastic at the front end. Endeavor to look for alternative products that are not packaged in plastic or made of plastic!

Taken from Jennifer Jarland with Kane County