

Curbside Recycling 101
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For the Skagit Valley Herald

Compared to the job of a trashcan, the recycle bin works for a noble cause: reduce the demand of Earth's virgin resources by reprocessing those already present and valuable in the waste stream.

Sounds simple, but most days the blue and green bins that line our neighborhood streets go unnoticed; they hang out on the curb, rain or shine, to collect and temporarily store our recyclables. These bins represent one of the most important material collection programs we have in place today.

We have come a long way since curbside pick-up began. Twenty years ago, only one curbside recycling program existed in the United States. By 1998, 9,000 curbside programs and 12 drop-off centers for recyclables had sprouted up across the nation.

Source-separated collection systems were first, in which households had to sort their recyclables into two or three bins at the curb in order to avoid contaminating the each resource and to allow the end-sorting process to run smoothly.

In 2003 single-stream (or commingled) recycling hit the curb. By 2008, a vast majority of households with access to curbside recycling in Washington state were serviced with commingled collection containers for their recyclables.

Commingled recycling dramatically increased the household participation rate. With little or no sorting required, it was less work for residents.

The single bin also allowed for automated collection in neighborhoods, which increased efficiency and decreased worker injuries. While the rate of unrecyclable "residual" (**materials that can't be used**) is high with commingling overall, this method of collecting mixed recyclables was the best way to recover spent resources.

Recycling remains a confusing **business**, due to fluctuating market values and jurisdictional differences. However, you can still take actions to ensure the remanufacture of your recyclables. Along with waving hello to your garbage man, keep these tips in mind:

Rethink purchases

Rethinking what you purchase is an act of universal responsibility. Reorganizing your thinking to focus on what you can do to benefit life, rather than leave it bereft, makes you accountable for your impact on natural resources.

Try buying items you know can be recycled, or skip it and opt for more earth-friendly alternatives, like bulk grain purchased in a reusable muslin bag. After all, "recycling" is only the third R (**after Reduce and Reuse**) in the waste management hierarchy.

Keep recyclables clean

Rinsing is an especially good idea if you're serviced with commingled curbside recycling. Paper is easily contaminated by oil and grease, which is why pizza boxes usually aren't accepted unless they are in pristine condition.

If you're concerned about wasting water during the washout, try this method: First, scrape out as much food residue as possible — I recommend using a long, skinny spatula for this job — and then swish out the can or bottle in your leftover dishwasher.

If you use a dishwasher, don't take up valuable space with items that are meant for the recycling bin. Instead, fill a large bowl with water and use it to clean out residual food particles from several containers at once. (Go online to www.slate.com/id/2189612/ for an in-depth discussion.)

Stick to the basics

Concern about the efficiency of the recycling process is a good thing. Make the operation smooth by reading your community's recycling guidelines so that you're not overloading the system with nonrecyclable materials. Remember that even a small amount of the wrong, dirty item can spoil the whole load **and send it to a landfill instead.**

Avoid plastics confusion

Plastics come in a variety of colors and chemical formulations — all with different recycling needs. The code number does not mean the plastic can be recycled; it is simply a way to identify the resin, or plastic, type. Therefore, the recycling of plastics depends on shape, and not the number on the bottom.

All residents in Skagit County serviced by curbside recycling can recycle clean plastic bottles, jars and jugs. Your curbside bin also accepts plastic yogurt containers and dairy tubs.

Plastic take-out containers, plastic bakery trays and plastic meat containers are NOT accepted for recycling. Try to avoid purchasing them.

Bag it

Often mistaken for food by marine mammals and migratory birds, plastic bags do a lot more harm than good. Not to mention they jam the machines that sort single-stream recycling.

Keep plastic bags out of curbside bins; return them to your supermarket for proper disposal. Choose to reuse, and sport the designer grocery hobo (**reusable bag??**) you've been eyeing at the local cooperative.

Sign up to recycle

The benefits of commingled recycling at the curb are many. Residents don't have to sort their discards, nor do they have to drive to take materials to a distant recycle center.

Chances are good more items can be recycled in the blue bin than at recycling drop-off locations.

If you live inside city limits, you're already serviced with curbside recycling. Make the most of it.

Folks living in parts of unincorporated Skagit County may want to consider the cost of self-hauling and self-sorting their recycling versus the cost of curbside pick-up. **It is likely you and your neighbors qualify for service, though it may not be available yet in all areas.**

Interested in signing up? Contact Waste Management at 360-757-8245 to find out if your location qualifies **and, if not, what needs to happen to become eligible.**

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