

Skagit Valley Herald
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Don't Let Recycling Foil You

Finding a venue for those difficult to recycle items, like aluminum pie tins, take-out clamshells and plastic baggies is downright frustrating, for good reason. Frustration comes naturally when we begin to care about where our garbage goes. Rather than wasting your effort, start thinking realistically. If a packaging item is not traditionally accepted as "recyclable" in your curbside bin, it is probably not worth buying. The effort to change your purchasing habits may seem daunting, but once comfortable alternatives are found, you will be one step closer to a sustainable lifestyle. Good detective skills are handy when identifying packaging materials that can't easily be reused or recycled. Today, most plastic packaging materials are recyclable due to their shape, and not the number on the bottom. "That one detail (shape vs. number) can stump people for years," says Waste Management's Community Education Director Rita Smith. Folks look at the bottom of the container and think: "Well, I have two containers here that don't look anything alike, but they're both labeled as a Code One plastic, so they both must be recyclable." This just is not true, Smith says. Another name for plastic is polymer. And seven different kinds of polymer resin are used to create the various forms of food packaging we see in stores today. Take resin Code One, for example, which is chemically known as Polyethylene Terephthalate or PET. This plastic is usually accepted at the curbside in bottle form: mouthwash, soda and salad dressing to name a few. But what about when it's found in the form of microwavable film on top of a TV dinner or as the plastic "to-go" lid snapped onto iced coffee? These items aren't accepted at the curbside. That is because, in order to take a shape, polymer resins must first be melted. At varying melting points, plastics take on different properties, thus making them more versatile in their packaging abilities. While one batch of plastic resin Code One goes to bottling carbonated beverages, the other will help to heat up a mac and cheese dish in the oven. Same type of plastic, packaged around completely different foods. No longer can these plastics be recycled together. Although they originated from the same resin, their melting points made them different and even a small amount of the wrong plastic can ruin an entire bale of recyclable plastic. Window cleaner and dishwashing detergent bottles may also foil you, disguised as Code One when they are really Code Three. And that is another type of plastic that's almost never accepted curbside. During the holidays when food packaging may abound, review your recycling guidelines and remember that recyclability depends on both the container's shape and its resin code. Aluminum pie tins and foil are another conundrum, especially on Thanksgiving. But why are aluminum cans recyclable but not the tins or foil? Aluminum foil and pie tins are made from a lighter grade aluminum stock, which melts more quickly than the cans when being repurposed. In fact, if a lighter grade foil makes it into a batch of heavier grade aluminum, it usually causes a fire hazard inside the melting furnace, because it burns rather than melts. Behind difficult-to-recycle plastics, resin codes and aluminum foil is a hard truth. Some recyclables simply cannot be made into other products, or doing so is

not economically feasible. The local recycler does not accept particular items because the markets for those items are either too small or nonexistent. Instead of letting these frustrating facts get you down, let them fire up your ingenuity and renew your sense of purchasing power. For instance, freeze large batches of microwavable meals like lasagna or turkey enchiladas in reusable containers as one way to bypass the purchase of plastic films. Or buy foods in bulk rather than in individually packaged servings to make a huge difference to both your wallet and your waste bin. Check the bottom of shampoo and detergent bottles for Codes One or Two, rather than Three, Four and Five, to help you make more sustainable purchases when it comes to recycling. Choose to buy recyclable and recycled materials, or do not buy at all! The nation celebrated America Recycles Day, www.americarecyclesday.org, on Nov. 15. You can participate year round by making seasonally well-informed recycling purchases, like investing in cloth produce bags and reusable food containers. Get into the spirit of the season and bake a pie for a new neighbor; it is a great excuse to give a reusable pie plate — and a chance to be acquainted. Households or neighborhoods can participate in a recycling challenge by setting aside a separate bin to collect those difficult-to-recycle plastics and haul them away together. In Skagit County, Skagit River Steel and Recycling accepts most plastic films, as well as those items with difficult-to-recycle resin codes, but only at their Burlington site. Organize a neighborhood collection effort and trade off responsibility between households for weekly drop-offs. Staying honest about the realities of recycling enlightens local resources, empowers personal habits, and supports the sustainability of the collection system we have in place. You can learn more about recycling markets and curbside trends online at www.thinkgreen.com.

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