

Recycling

What exactly is recycling? Recycling is the process of taking a product at the end of its useful life and reusing all or part of it to make another product. To represent this reuse, the internationally recognized symbol for recycling includes three arrows moving in a triangle. Each arrow represents a different part of the recycling process, from collection to re-manufacture to resale. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 75 percent of our waste is recyclable, which goes well beyond what you toss in your recycling bin at home or at school. Recycling serves three key purposes:

1. It keeps valuable material such as aluminum and paper **out of landfills**, so this material can be reused in other forms and not wasted.
2. It reduces the amount of energy needed to produce new items by making them out of recycled items.
3. It **prevents hazardous materials** and chemicals such as lead and mercury from ending up in landfills, which can contaminate soil and leach into our drinking water

Because of the third purpose, it's important to recycle lots of products, including those that you might not initially think of recycling. This includes batteries, electronics, motor oil, paint and any product that has "Caution" or "Warning" on the label.

Recycling Tips

1. **First things first, a little R & R & R:** The saying,, "reduce, reuse, recycle" is so tired it should go without saying, but the fact is most of us have only heard the last third of the phrase; and they're ranked in order of importance. Reducing the amount that we consume, and shifting our consumption to well-designed products and services, are the first steps. Finding constructive uses for "waste" materials is next. And tossing it in the green bin is last (The garbage can is not on the list, for good reason.). You can easily see your landfill-destined waste dwindle fast through a balance of these three principals. For example, setting your empty water bottles in the bin on the curb is a good example of recycling, but you can *reduce* or completely eliminate your need for disposable plastic bottles by using a water filter and *reusable* container.
2. **Know what you can and can't recycle:** Read up on the recycling rules for your area and make sure you don't send anything in that can't be processed. Each city has its own specifics, so try to follow those guidelines as best you can. Local guidelines can be viewed at <http://www.brevardcounty.us/swr/recycling.cfm>).
3. **Buy recycled:** The essence of recycling is the cyclical movement of materials through the system, eliminating waste and the need to extract more virgin materials. Supporting recycling means feeding this loop by not only recycling, but also supporting recycled products. We can now find high levels of recycled content in everything from printer paper to office chairs.
4. **Encourage an artist:** If you know someone interested in making art from recycled materials, offer to provide supplies. Many school children need items like paper towel tubes for art projects. Older artists use everything from rubber bands to oven doors. If you know someone who teaches art classes, suggest that an emphasis be put on making art from trash. While you're at it, remind them to use recycled paper and biodegradable, earth-friendly glues, paints, and pencils whenever possible.

5. **Recycle your water:** If you have a garden, water it with leftover bathwater or dishwashing water (as long as you use a biodegradable soap). Use a rain barrel or create a rain garden!
6. **Recycle your greenery:** So-called “waste” is divided into two categories: technical nutrients and biological nutrients. Biological nutrients are those that, at the end of their useful life, can safely and readily decompose and return to the soil. Composting is one of the simplest and most effective biological-nutrient recycling methods. Both your garden cuttings and your green kitchen waste can go into an outdoor or indoor composter (with or without entertaining a population of worms). If you don't have a garden yourself, find neighbors or a community garden that can make use of your soil. Composting food scraps will mean your regular kitchen wastebasket fills up more slowly and also won't smell. Hotter, more active compost heaps can also consume tougher stuff like newspaper and paper napkins. After Christmas, many cities also have programs for turning your tree trimmings into mulch.
7. **Recycle your electronics:** Electronics recycling is becoming more common in many urban areas, battery recycling is ubiquitous (rechargeable batteries are ecologically sounder, but even they wear out after a while), and there are a number of non-profit organizations that will take computer parts and turn them into working computers for others. Companies like eBay have also developed programs to help your electronics find new homes. Other groups will gladly recycle your cell phone, or give it to a senior citizen, because it can still make emergency calls without a service contract. If you have a major appliance that doesn't work and you'd rather replace it than try to fix it, offer it to local repair shops, trade schools, or hobbyists to tinker with.
8. **Anticipate recycling:** In addition to buying recycled goods, keep a keen eye out for recyclable goods. Whenever you purchase something packaged, think about how you can reuse the packaging, return it to a shipping store for reuse, or try to otherwise recycle it. If you get something likely to run down or wear out over time, such as an electronic component, give preference to the model that can be easily upgraded or cannibalized for parts so that you don't have to junk the whole thing if one part breaks. Products that are impossibly fused together are often called “monstrous hybrids”, and while often cheaper up front, are frequently unfixable and unrecyclable.
9. **If you don't love something, let it go:** Lots of charities welcome your donations. Groups like Freecycle (www.freecycle.org) and Recycler's Exchange (www.recycle.net) exist to help you get rid of useful objects that you don't want to make use of. If you're in a Craigslist (www.craigslist.com) city, make use of the "free stuff" section. Give away clothes that don't fit, the boxes you used in your last house move, or scented soaps that don't appeal to your sensibilities. Make it a rule in your house that nothing useable goes in the trash until you've given the community a fair shot at it.
10. **Become a waste-stream analyst:** To better understand the kind of materials that enter and leave your home, office, or school, consider conducting a *waste audit*. Set a timespan of a week or a month, and separate your waste categories. Record the different kinds of material flows that go out the door (landfill waste, organic compost, aluminum, recyclable plastic, reusable material, etc.). Design a “material recovery” program that minimizes the amount going to the landfill. This is a great exercise to do with kids but can be very convincing to corporate higher-ups, too, especially since most companies pay to have their trash hauled away and can get money for recycled paper, containers, toner cartridges, corrugated cardboard, and other office supplies.

Recycling: By the Numbers

- **544,000:** The number of trees saved if every household in the United States replaced just one roll of virgin fiber paper towels (70 sheets) with 100 percent recycled ones.
- **20 million:** The tons of electronic waste thrown away each year. One ton of scrap from discarded computers contains more gold than can be produced from 17 tons of gold ore.
- **9 cubic yards:** The amount of landfill space saved by recycling one ton of cardboard.
- **\$160 billion:** The value of the global recycling industry that employs over 1.5 million people.
- **79 million:** The tons of waste material diverted away from disposal in 2005 through recycling and composting.
- **5:** The percent of energy it takes to recycle aluminum versus mining and refining new aluminum.
- **315 kg:** The amount of carbon dioxide not released into the atmosphere each time a metric ton of glass is used to create new glass products.
- **98 :** The percent of Denmark's glass bottles that are refillable, and the percent of those that are actually returned by consumers for reuse.
- **51.5:** The percent of the paper consumed in the U.S. that was recovered for recycling in 2005.