

Top 11 Tips to Become an Expert at Recycling

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › To become an expert recycler, learn what you can recycle and what you cannot; make sure recyclables are empty, clean and dry, and place all recyclables loose into your recycle bin (do not put them in plastic bags)
- › Obvious ways to reduce waste of all kinds is to reduce overall consumption, avoid buying products made from or packaged in plastic whenever possible, and opt for reusable products over single-use
- › Give clothes and gently used household items to charities; use online sites like Freecycle.org that allow you to give products away; ask friends and family if anyone might want or need the items you're getting rid of
- › Soft plastics such as plastic shopping bags and food storage bags cannot be recycled as they clog the sorting machines. Ditto for plastic straws and bottle caps
- › Combination items such as Bubble Wrap envelopes require special attention. While both plastic and paper can be recycled individually, when they're combined into one product, they cannot, unless they're separated first

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Do you recycle? If you do, the tips in this article will help you do it better, and if you don't, why not make it a point to start this year, armed with the essential do's and don'ts?

It's worth remembering that mankind had a zero-waste lifestyle up until about 100 years ago. There were no plastic wraps around the foods and items you bought, and virtually

every scrap — be it fabric, paper, wood or metal — was repeatedly reused and creatively repurposed into new products.

Today, we're figuratively drowning in garbage. Plastic has become a tremendous environmental problem that threatens wildlife and human health alike. Discarded clothing has also become a toxic burden.

As reported by The Guardian,¹ "extraordinary levels" of plastic pollution have been discovered even at the Mariana Trench in the Pacific, the deepest point in the ocean, as well as the Swiss Alps, showing just how pervasive this problem has become.

Reports also reveal just how challenging it is to clean up this kind of garbage once it's in the environment. The \$20 million Ocean Cleanup project, for example, which is working to clear plastic waste from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, recently reported² they're failing in their mission.

Boyan Slat, who invented the collection device, says it's unable to hold on to the plastic it collects. His team is now working on a solution to prevent collected trash from escaping.

It's quite clear we need to rethink our throwaway culture and become more sustainably creative. Here, I'll provide a number of different ways you can make a difference in your day-to-day life, and learn to recycle like a pro.^{3,4}

Be Mindful of What You Buy in the First Place

Perhaps the most obvious way to reduce waste of all kinds is to reduce overall consumption. The less you buy, the less you'll have to find a "home" for later. Also avoid buying products made from or packaged in plastic whenever possible, and opt for reusable products over single-use, which is possible in most instances.

Recycling responsibly is a step in the right direction, but it's even more important to reduce and reuse what we have first. The average American produces 4.5 pounds of

garbage each and every day.⁵ Surely most people can find ways to cut that down considerably, without going through too much trouble. For example, you can:

1. Use reusable shopping bags for groceries
2. Bring your own mug when indulging in a coffee drink – and skip the lid and the straw
3. Bring drinking water from home in glass water bottles instead of buying bottled water
4. Store foods in glass containers or Mason jars rather than plastic containers and plastic freezer bags
5. Take your own leftovers container to restaurants
6. Avoid disposable utensils
7. Avoid processed foods (which are typically sold with plastic wrapping or plastic-lined paper boxes). Buy fresh produce instead, and use reusable vegetable bags brought from home rather than plastic bags
8. Request no plastic wrap on your newspaper and dry cleaning
9. Opt for nondisposable razors, washable feminine hygiene products, cloth diapers, handkerchiefs instead of paper tissues and rags in lieu of paper towels (old shirts and socks can be repurposed as cleaning rags)
10. Buy infant toys made of wood or (untreated) fabric rather than plastic
11. Frequent secondhand stores instead of buying new

Recycle and Repurpose as Much as You Can

Whatever you do buy, you'll eventually have to figure out how to dispose of. Wrapping needs to be discarded immediately, but items of all kinds eventually need to be replaced or discarded. Before you toss an item in the trash bin, take a moment to consider whether it can be recycled or repurposed. Some ideas include:

- Identifying recyclables, nonrecyclables, and items that can be recycled but need special processing. General categories of items accepted for curbside recycling are:
 - Paper and cardboard
 - Metal cans
 - Plastic bottles and jugs
 - Glass
- Giving clothes and gently used household items to charities
- Using online sites like Freecycle.org that allow you to give products you no longer need away to others instead of throwing them away
- Asking friends and family if anyone might want or need the items you're getting rid of

How to Properly Recycle Plastic Items

Despite your best intentions, chances are you'll end up with some plastic waste here and there. Here are some tips for recycling it properly so that it doesn't just end up in a landfill. Start by sorting. Two primary categories of plastic are soft plastic and rigid items.

- **Soft plastic** — Soft plastics such as plastic shopping bags and food storage bags cannot be recycled as they clog the sorting machines. Ditto for plastic straws.
- **Never place recyclables in plastic bags,**⁶ as the recycling facility will toss the entire bag with its contents into a landfill rather than recycle them. Instead, collect your plastic bags and bring them to your local supermarket for recycling. Plastic straws, unfortunately, cannot be recycled and are destined for a landfill no matter what, which is why they're best avoided in the first place.

- **Hard plastic** — Most rigid plastics, such as bottles and rigid packaging can be recycled (just remember to put these items loose in your recycling bin; do not put them in a plastic bag), but there are exceptions.

To determine whether an item can be recycled or not, look for the triangular recycling symbol.⁷ The number inside tells you what kind of plastic the product is made of. Keep in mind that whether or not an item can be recycled will depend on your local recycling rules, so get the specifics from your municipality.

In all instances, remember to separate bottles and caps, as most bottles are made of PETE with a recycling code of "1," while caps are typically made from polypropylene, which has a recycling code of "5" and therefore cannot be recycled together. Caps typically need to be discarded in the trash anyway, as they are too small to be properly sorted by the machines.

Yet another factor to consider is food residues. Plastic materials with food residues cannot be recycled, so make sure you wash any recyclable plastics that have been in contact with food or beverages (the exception being water) and allow them to dry before you place it in the recycle bin.^{8,9}

(This rule also applies to pizza boxes and other paper-based food containers. Since the grease cannot be washed off, you'll need to remove the greasy section, toss that in the trash, and recycle the rest.)

How to Sort Combination Items

Combination items such as to-go coffee cups and Bubble Wrap envelopes also require special attention. While both plastic and paper can be recycled individually, when they're combined into one product, they cannot. To recycle Bubble Wrap envelopes or envelopes with plastic windows, remove the Bubble Wrap and plastic window before placing the paper envelope into recycling.

Another example is newspaper wrapped in plastic. To recycle the paper, you must remove the plastic wrapper (the recycling facility will NOT do this extra step, so you

must do it at home, before putting it into your recycling bin).

Similarly, before placing cans in your recycling bin, be sure to remove any paper or plastic labels, wash the can to remove any food or liquid residue and let dry, as wet cans can contaminate paper items you place in your bin.

Coffee cups cannot be recycled as you cannot separate the plastic lining from the paper. Cardboard, newspaper, magazines, office paper and mail can all be recycled provided they're not contaminated by food, liquid or other waste.

Items with a recycling number of "7" are also tricky, as there's no clear-cut way of knowing whether it can be recycled. No. 7 is the category for "other" plastics — basically anything that doesn't fit categories 1 through 6, including biodegradable plastics that require special treatment, and nonrecyclable plastic such as melamine, which is so hard it cannot be remelted.¹⁰

Waxy milk and juice cartons can be recycled, but remove the cap and don't flatten the carton. If they're missed via hand sorting an infrared optical sorter will pick them out (and certain other three-dimensional items) from the mix. If you crush the cartons, they may be missed.

Items That Should Never Be Placed in Your Recycling Bin

While some of the following items can be recycled (or repurposed), they should never be placed in your curbside recycling bin, as they require special processing and/or can contaminate or interfere with the recycling process:

Plastic bags	Plastic wrap	Styrofoam
Greasy pizza boxes	Food	Electronics
Batteries	Yard waste	Diapers

Soiled paper such as paper towels and napkins	Single-use or to-go cups, paper food bowls with plastic lining, wax paper and wax paper liners (such as those in pizza boxes)	Medical waste such as needles and syringes
Tools	Plastic toys	Construction waste
Scrap metal	Clothing	Shoes
Foil potato chip and snack bags	Foil lids from yogurt containers	Anything smaller than a Post-it note
Christmas tree lights	Wire hangers	Auto parts
Propane tanks	Mattresses	Bowling balls

What to Do With Hard-to-Recycle Items

Many items can still be recycled even if your local recycling facility does not accept them. Here are some ideas for what to do with more hard-to-recycle items:

- **Appliances** – Goodwill or the Steel Recycling Institute¹¹ can help you out with these
- **Compact fluorescent light bulbs** (which contain mercury) – The Environmental Protection Agency lists recycling facilities across the U.S. that will recycle these bulbs and other items.¹² One of the easiest ways to identify a local recycler is to visit [search.Earth911.com](https://www.earth911.com)¹³
- **Eyeglasses** – Your local Lion's Club or eye care chain may collect these for redistribution to people in need. Many eyeglass stores offer drop-off boxes as well
- **Tennis shoes** – Nike's Reuse-a-Shoe program¹⁴ turns old shoes into playground and athletic flooring

Turn Your Food Waste Into a Valuable Commodity

Last but not least, there's the issue of food waste. While few U.S. municipalities accept food waste, you can compost it and turn it into excellent fertilizer to benefit your garden. Composting food waste is about more than simply conserving limited landfill space.

When organic materials sit in landfills, bacteria break them down into methane gas, which is the third largest source of U.S. emissions.¹⁵ So cutting back on the amount of organics entering landfills also cuts back on these climate-altering emissions.

Ideally, citywide recycling programs will expand to collect food and yard waste along with other recyclables, with the organic material being sent to composting facilities. You don't, however, need to wait for this to happen to begin reaping the benefits of compost in your own backyard.

You can compost in a pile, in a box or a ready-made tumbling composter bin. The bin is very convenient but can cost upward of \$200. Less expensive options include making your own from wood, recycled plastic or even chicken wire.

Tumblers (rotating drums) are great because they make aeration a breeze — all you have to do is turn the drum every few days, which takes less effort than turning a pile with a fork or shovel. They are also much faster to compost; you can get great compost in as little as one to two weeks, while the piles will take many months to digest.

Many local municipalities also have bins available for a reasonable price. For the best moisture and temperature regulation, select bins that hold at least 1 cubic yard. Your compost zone should be conveniently located, as close as possible to your source of raw materials (kitchen scraps, lawn clippings or soiled paper products) where it won't be too much of an eyesore.

If you are using piles or bins, I recommend having two of them as then you'll have a place to put fresh scraps while one full "batch" of compost finishes curing. The video above also offers a quick summary of the basics.

Our "disposable culture" has left a trail of destruction, in terms of both environmental and human impact. There is no one single solution to the waste problem. But you can do your part by taking steps to reduce your waste, recycle and repurpose what you can.

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