

Recycling 101

Here's how to do it right wherever you live, plus what all the numbers on containers mean

Fact: Recycling one aluminum can saves enough energy to run a TV for three hours. So, yes, it pays off. Here's how to do it right wherever you live.

Collect newspapers in a paper grocery bag or in tied bundles, depending on your community's guidelines, and set them out on pickup day. (It takes up to 75,000 trees to produce one Sunday edition of the New York Times.)

Don't recycle wet cardboard. It can clog sorting machines. Throw it away to keep it from contaminating the rest of the load.

Don't recycle bottle tops; they're not made from the same plastic as recyclable bottles. But if you forget, don't sweat it. They'll be sorted down the line. (The energy saved by recycling one plastic bottle can power a computer for 25 minutes.)

Rinse cans, but crushing isn't necessary. The aluminum can is the most recycled item in the United States, as well as the most valuable. It can be recycled again and again, and so efficiently that a can is regenerated and back on the shelf in as little as 60 days.

Don't fret if you can't get the lime out of the beer bottle or the last of the peanut butter from the jar. The recycler's machinery will zap all contaminants. But do empty and rinse glass jars and containers.

Wondering about the little numbers on your milk container? They identify what the container is made of — and what it will be in its next life.

1 PET (polyethylene terephthalate): Soda bottles; recycled into pillow fill.

2 HDPE (high-density polyethylene): Plastic milk bottles, detergent bottles; recycled into new detergent bottles.

3 PVC (polyvinyl chloride): Take-out boxes, shampoo; recycled into drainage and irrigation pipes.

4 LDPE (low-density polyethylene): Grocery bags, shrink wrap; recycled into new bags.

5 PP (polypropylene): Yogurt containers, bottle caps; recycled into plastic lumber.

6 PS (polystyrene): Packing peanuts; recycled into plastic lumber, cassette-tape boxes.

7 Other: Includes squeezable ketchup bottles and microwavable dishes; these items can't be recycled.

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