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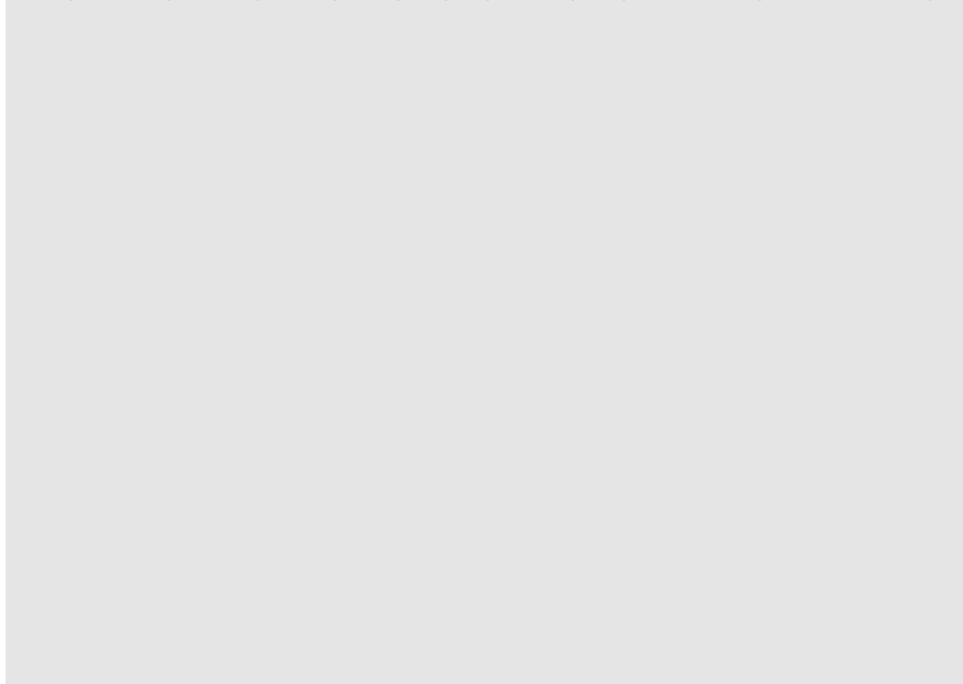
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What's Recyclable? Connecticut is Taking Steps to Sort Out the Confusion

Nov 23,
Ed Stannard 2018



Don't you dare put that plastic grocery bag in your recycling bin. Not only does it muck up



Michael Cummo

the recycling center's equipment, it poses a real danger to workers.

That doesn't mean plastic bags aren't recyclable. They are, along with other items known in the industry as "film": bread bags, the plastic wrap that comes on almost anything we buy, dry-cleaning bags. You can bring all that to the grocery store and other places that accept it. Just don't — DON'T — put them in your curbside recycling bin. Please.

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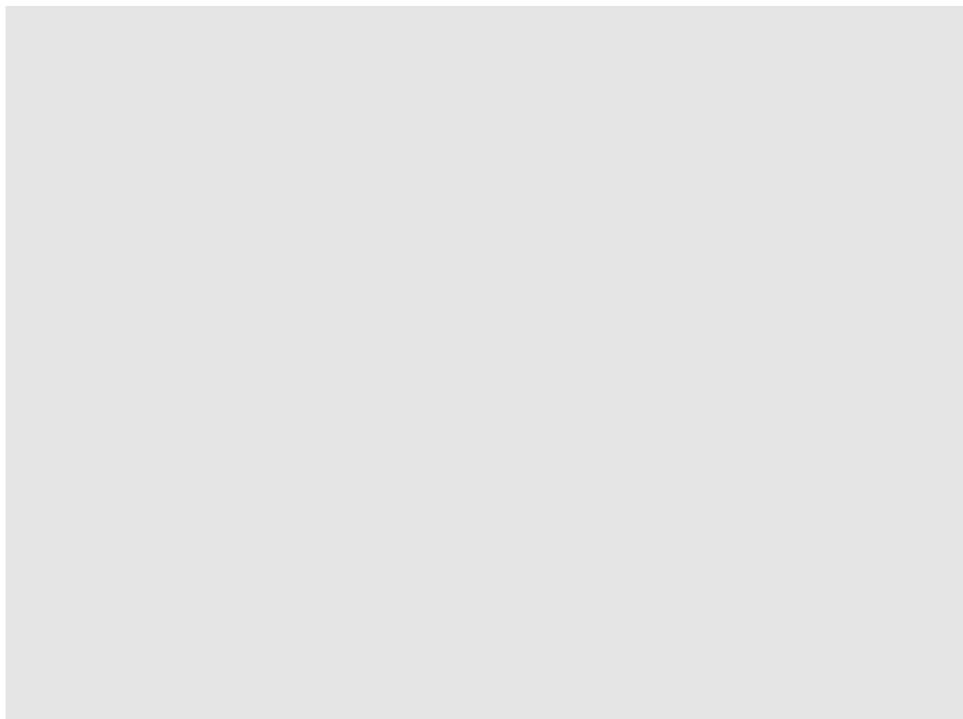
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When plastic bags get into sorting equipment, “workers get hurt,” says Lynn Rubinstein, executive director of the [Northeast Recycling Council](#), a nonprofit organization based in Brattleboro, Vermont, that promotes recycling in 11 states from New England to Maryland. “Not only is it a contaminant, but it literally is dangerous for workers in those facilities. They have to send people in there to manually peel it out. There are sharp blades, hundreds of them ... and everything has to be shut down. It’s incredibly dangerous,” Rubinstein says.

Plastic bags are just one example of the growing complexities and challenges of recycling, which is mandated in Connecticut. While they can be placed in containers at the supermarket for recycling, they shouldn’t be put in the curbside bin. (Better to use canvas bags, which are altogether better for the environment.)

“The truth is that the strategy that has been used for many years ... how to explain what to recycle and how to recycle, has been incredibly confusing,” Rubinstein says. “We need to do a much better job.”

Concerned about that confusion, the state’s [RecycleCT program](#), run by the [Department of Energy and Environmental Protection](#), late last year created the “What’s In, What’s Out” campaign to spread the word about what to recycle and how. Along with plastic bags, other no-no’s are styrofoam cups, foam peanuts, and disposable razors.



Ads like this one are part of the state's campaign to ease the confusion over what is and isn't recyclable in Connecticut.

“The campaign is really focused on helping people know what goes in your curbside bin and what doesn’t,” says Sherill Baldwin, who runs RecycleCT for DEEP. Working with the state’s recycling companies and others, “it was the plan of the department to create a statewide marketing campaign around recycling. However, we realized that every town is different. It became almost a joke.”

So RecycleCT took on the problem and created its in-and-out list after consulting with the state’s recycling companies, known as materials recovery facilities. There’s even a widget on its website, which can be installed on municipal and other sites, where you can find out whether something is in or out. Each item was discussed with the facilities operators in terms of whether it was “detrimental to your staff or [might] cause harm to your employees” and whether it might be hazardous to the company’s equipment, Baldwin says.

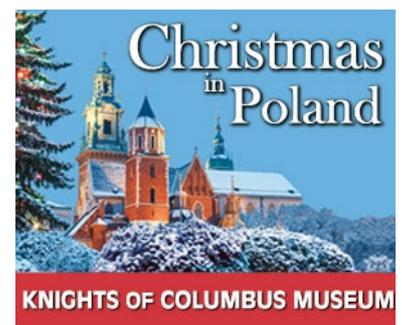
“I think overall it’s a sound and strong program,” she says. A survey was recently sent to find out whether consumers and municipalities are using the RecycleCT’s list and its materials, including sticker templates, brochures, videos, social media images and bin stickers and



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hangers. Baldwin says municipalities are making changes as contracts come up for renewal.

“Our program is about outreach and education but it’s also about changing behavior, and that is a long-term process,” she says.

RecycleCT recently won an award from the Northeast Recycling Council for its multimedia campaign, which has received 70,000 website visits, 104,000 searches on its website widget and 1.9 million video views since its launch Nov. 14, 2017. “Connecticut’s effort to simplify the communication about what to recycle is a major step forward,” Rubinstein says. “As far as I know, it was the first in the country to pull this off.”

If you’re unsure about something, you should find out what your town or city accepts, because RecycleCT is a voluntary program, and each town can modify the list based on its contract with its hauler or recycling company.

So while Stamford and Norwalk, for example, don’t take plastic bags, they do take **two things that are not on RecycleCT’s list**: loose plastic bottle caps — the state list is OK with them if they’re screwed onto plastic bottles — and shredded paper, also on the state’s “no” list unless it’s brought to a community shredding event. (Metal bottle caps are not recyclable, though.)

Norwalk and Stamford both contract with **City Carting and Recycling**, based in Stamford, which accepts both items. “We have the equipment to sort things,” says Robert Rodia, who runs the scale for City Carting, which receives recyclables from as far as Massachusetts and Long Island. Shredded paper “goes through the plant and gets bailed and goes overseas,” Rodia says, even though Rubinstein lists it as one of the worst items to enter other recycling plants. “Once it hits a recycling bin it literally acts like confetti,” she says. “It explodes all over the place and it literally contaminates everything.”

City Carting has no problem with loose plastic bottle caps, according to Rodia, who says they get combined with other plastics. But they were debated before being included in “What’s In, What’s Out.”

Another item of contention was pizza boxes. “Do pizza boxes cause harm to your staff? No,” Baldwin says. “However, if there’s pizza or cheese or the greasy liner, we don’t want it. So it’s in,” as long as the box is clean, she says.

A problem arises when a town wants the hauler or recycling company to take something that the state hasn’t approved. “In that case I’m the baddie,” Baldwin says. “I will tell you that plastic bags are problematic for all of our facilities.”

As far as other plastics, any plastic container, such as a bottle or tub, is acceptable. The state doesn’t use the numbering system that says which plastic it is because people sometimes toss in numbered plastic items that are not containers, which are not recyclable.

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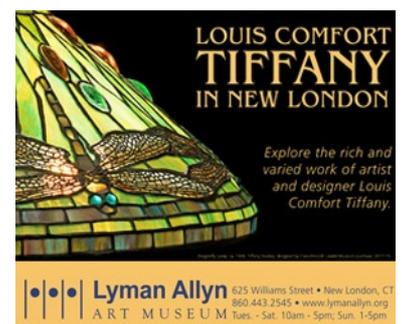
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Knowing what can be recycled and what should be thrown away can be confusing, which is why the Connecticut DEEP's RecycleCT program has created a guide to what can and cannot go into curbside recycling bins. Here are some of the most commonly asked-about materials.

Still not sure what to do with it? Look up a specific object at recyclect.com

Source: recyclect.com

Recycling: IN or OUT ?

General guidelines

All items placed into recycling should be empty, rinsed, clean and open. Do not shred, box, bag or bundle.

Your town may have different guidelines. Check with your town's recycling coordinator at ct.gov/deep.

Pizza boxes

Like cardboard in general, pizza boxes are recyclable if they're clean and all food and liners are removed. Cardboard boxes should be flattened before placing in your bin.



Plastic containers

Most plastic bottles, food containers and tubs, and one-use cups are acceptable as long as they are clean and rinsed with all food removed. Note that small plastic objects (like cutlery, straws and lids) CANNOT be recycled; reuse or put them in the trash.



Aluminum foil

Aluminum foil, baking pans and pie plates are all recyclable. Make sure the foil is clean of any food residue. Aluminum cans are also recyclable.



Milk & juice cartons

Either paper or plastic containers can be recycled if they are rinsed and clean. Plastic caps must be rinsed and attached to the carton. (In most municipalities, loose plastic caps cannot be recycled and should be put in the trash.)



Aerosol cans

Only empty, food-grade aerosol cans are recyclable.

	Empty	Partially full
Food-grade	RECYCLE	TRASH
Non-food	TRASH	HHW*

*HHW (Household Hazardous Waste) materials can be taken to designated collection centers or one-day collection events. Find more information via your local recycling coordinator at ct.gov/deep

Styrofoam

This includes cups, take-out containers and packing peanuts. Consider reusing if you can; otherwise put it in your trash.



Plastic bags

Although plastic bags (and wrap) are recyclable, it is very important to NOT put them in your bin, either loose or with recyclables inside. Take empty bags to a retailer or grocery store that accepts them instead. (And consider switching to reusable canvas bags.)



Shredded paper

Sheets of paper, including junk mail, can be recycled, but in many towns shredded paper cannot be and should go in your trash. (Gift wrap and tissue paper also cannot be recycled — consider reusing them if possible.)



Batteries

No batteries should go in your bin. **Non-rechargeable batteries** can be disposed of in the trash. **Rechargeable batteries** can be recycled via **HHW** collections or at retailers like Walmart or Best Buy. **Car batteries** may be accepted at your local transfer station; also, retailers are required by state law to accept a used car battery when they sell a new one.



Prescription pill bottles

Pill bottles should be disposed of in the trash, but carefully. Remove the label (or at least the patient's name) before discarding. If there is medication left over, your local police or pharmacy may be able to dispose of it; otherwise, add water (to pills or capsules) or a substance like dirt or kitty litter (to liquid meds), then seal the bottle in another container such as a zip-close bag or margarine tub before putting in the trash.



ALSO OUT

TRASH: Toothpaste tubes • Incandescent lightbulbs • Paper cups • Single-use coffee pods • Empty paint cans • Broken glass (place in a sealed, labeled box or container)

HHW*: Electronics • Fluorescent lightbulbs • Poisons and pest control • Automotive products • Personal care products • Household cleaners • Smoke detectors • Unused oil paints

IMAGES VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Dan Colleluori, supervisor of solid waste and recycling for Stamford, says [the city revised its list July 1](#), based largely on the state's list and taking into account the change in the markets. While the city previously made money from recycling, it's now a money-losing operation. "We're paying through the nose for it," Colleluori says. "It used to be a revenue source," earning the city \$200,000 a year. Now, the city has to pay City Carting more than \$700,000 annually.

"The Chinese closed their borders to recycling," Colleluori says. "It's a national problem ... so markets for recyclables have really gone downhill."

In 2017, the Chinese imposed strict new restrictions on plastics and other materials, citing contamination and a threat to its environment. Contamination is defined as nonrecyclable materials or other types of material being included with a load, such as a flattened plastic bottle in a bale of newsprint.

A 2015 study of the state's municipal waste disposal found that, in the recycling stream, about 18 percent of the materials was contamination and "half of that was bagged recyclables," Baldwin says. Too many people were putting their bottles and jars into plastic bags and dropping the bag into the recycling bin. "In 2017, 60 percent of our paper (we refer to it as fiber) ... went to China. In 2017, 36 percent of our plastics went to China. Now in 2018, 40 percent of our fiber has gone to China, but it's really only cardboard. They're no

longer accepting mixed paper. In 2018, 5 percent of our plastic is going to China.

“The reason for that decline is that in fall 2017, China came down and said, we are changing our contamination threshold and we no longer want contaminated loads.” As of March 1, the limit was dropped to 0.5 percent. The result has been that great amounts of recyclables are being incinerated or being dumped in landfills, and some is going to other countries, according to [a report by National Public Radio](#).

“However, there are domestic markets,” Baldwin says. “What it means is more domestic markets need to be developed.” She also repeats a common refrain among environmentalists: “If you’re not buying recycled, you’re not really recycling.”

Jonathan Murray, director of operations for Murphy Road Recycling of Berlin, says the Chinese clampdown has “definitely caused a drop in what the material is worth” and that “it costs more to process it [and] it takes longer to process it” to meet the contamination standards. It’s still possible to do that, though, he says.

Recycling companies face contamination problems when people put items out that they believe are recyclable — and may be, if brought to certain stores or facilities — but which don’t belong in the bin. Batteries and hazardous materials go to [HazWaste Central at the Regional Water Authority](#) and other similar sites. State law requires paint to be brought to drop-off locations such as paint or hardware stores. The widget at [recyclect.com](#) will let you know.

Mike Paine, owner of [Paine’s Inc. of East Granby](#), which picks up recyclables at the curb and brings them to processing plants, says he’s caught between towns wanting him “to accept as much as I can” and the recyclers wanting uncontaminated material. So he does his best to remove material from plastic bags and not to refuse what people put out.

Paine is concerned about the Chinese limits because “if they cannot accept stuff, it’s going to back right up to me and affect what I can pick up.

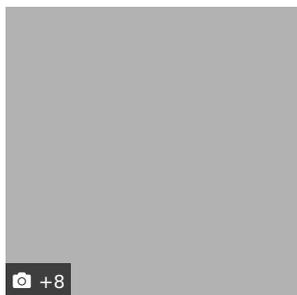
“I think we’ve frankly gotten ahead of ourselves and we should have set a standard to use more of our stuff internally ... to control our own destiny,” Paine says.

This article appeared in the [December 2018](#) issue of Connecticut Magazine. Like what you read? You can [subscribe here](#), or [find the current issue on sale here](#)

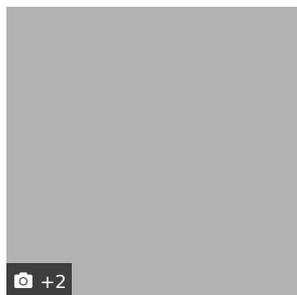


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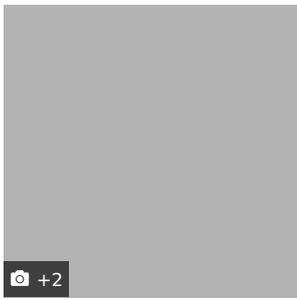
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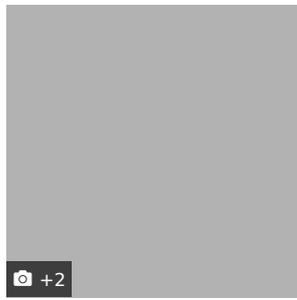
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