The Biggest Recycling Mistake You’re Making Is Done with Good Intentions

Remolador says the biggest mistake people make when recycling is putting more in the bin than can actually be recycled in their geographic area. “Sometimes it’s due to labeling on the package (i.e. this item is recyclable), other times it is misinformation or not knowing what can be recycled in your community. This phenomenon is referred to as “wish-cycling” and is spurred on by good intentions, to be sure. People wanting everything to be recycled regardless of what really can be recycled.”

Related Reading: How to Recycle Old Electronics Cluttering Up Your House

Some Things You Shouldn’t Recycle

This Recycling 101 Guide is a good place to start, but we’d strongly advise you to check your local recycling regulations to find out the actual deal in your hometown, city, or neighborhood. We certainly don’t want to discourage recycling, but there is usually a long list of things that people are recycling improperly. Some common items that, for the most part, don’t belong in recycling bins include plastic grocery bags, paper cups with a wax coating, rubber hoses, animal carcasses (should be composted), and plastic caps or lids, which are not always recyclable. There is also really nobody to patrol or correct you and so if it bags up the process. That means it’s incumbent on all of us to learn the rules and adopt our practices accordingly.

How to Find Out What’s Recyclable in Your Area

This all depends on where you live, but a Google search should turn up some results. If it doesn’t, contact your local waste management agency or town government and ask to be sent comprehensive recycling guidelines for your area. Many local governments have official Twitter accounts, which could be the fastest way to get answers. If they don’t have official recycling guidelines drawn up, request that they do. If they don’t recycle at all, put on your best Erin Brockovich wig and find out why the hell not.

There is no absolute uniformity in US recycling programs, although Earth911 is intended to be one website where everyone can search for their community’s recycling details. The information provided in this site is dependent on communities keeping their information updated. As you might imagine, some communities are better at this task than others.
What You Should Find Out About Recycling in Your Area

Some important questions to ask about your specific area’s recycling program:

- What can and cannot be recycled?
- What is the proper way to dispose of recycled materials so they are most easily processed (e.g., how should things be cleaned or separated)?
- Where and when should recycling be done? Certain towns and cities only pick up recycling on certain days or process recycling at certain locations, so find out.
- Do I need specific recycling bins or receptacles and where can I get them?

What to Do If Your Town Doesn’t Recycle

Cities and towns should all be out of excuses not to offer recycling, given all we know. “If you don’t think your town is recycling,” says Remolador, “find out if it’s true and then find out why. Every resident has a right to know what their town is doing with taxpayers’ money and recycling is something all communities should be participating in.”

“Go to town meetings about recycling,” she continues, “if you have to. Discuss recycling possibilities with your town manager. Find out who is in charge of recycling and get to know them and your recycling program.”

Related Reading: Earth Day Deals: Fancy Urban Garden System & Vitamix Compost Bin

What Else Can You Do to Help Lighten the Load in Landfills and at Recycling Plants?

“Watch what you buy,” says Remolador. “Look for products with reusable packaging. If you can’t find them in the store, look online. If the product you can’t live without comes in packaging that is not recyclable in your community, consider buying a different product that is. You can also contact product manufacturers to let them know you like their product, but not their packaging.”

Talk about all of this in your networks and on social media, too. Teach your friends and family if they don’t know. Consumers’ voices make a difference. Don’t forget to tag the brands or your local government’s social media handles if you have environmental issues to raise. You might be surprised at who is listening.

Related Reading: Composting 101: Everything You Need to Know About Preventing Food Waste

A Common Misconception About Recycling

One of the biggest false assumptions folks make about recycling is that it doesn’t cost anything. Recycling does have an inherent cost. “Our recycling infrastructure allows items we no longer have use for to become resources for manufacturers making new items. Just like any commodity marketplace, getting feedback to a manufacturer costs money and manpower,” Remolador explains. “The point being, it’s a complex process that employs thousands of Americans and a lot of hard work. Not taking advantage of it is really inexcusable and to the direct detriment of our economic and environmental health.”

Though guidelines and restrictions vary from place to place, check out this Recycling 101 Guide from the official Waste Management website to get started.

For Your Food Scraps

A smart bin like this makes it that much easier (and cleaner) to recycle properly.

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