

Surprising Recycling Mistakes Most People Make Daily

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Greasy, wet or food-contaminate items typically cannot be recycled; leaving water in a plastic bottle will also render it not recyclable
- › Scrap metal, wire hangers and paper cups with shiny coatings (like coffee cups) cannot be recycled
- › Plastic bags can be recycled but typically only through special collection bins at grocery stores
- › Recycling food waste via composting is being done at the community level across the U.S. and can also be done individually in your own backyard

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In the U.S., 292.4 million tons of municipal solid waste (MSW) are generated annually. Nearly 94 million tons of this MSW are recycled or composted, for a recycling rate of 32.1%.¹ It's a good start, but there's clearly room for improvement, especially because many of the items Americans throw in their recycling bins are not actually recyclable.

Many people toss questionable items in their bins hoping to give them a shot at being recycled, but the reality is that certain non-recyclable items will only be tossed into the trash bin at the recycling center.

Worse, some of the items may end up contaminating entire loads of recyclables that would otherwise have gone on to other uses. During a visit to Denver's recycling facility,

and specifically the waste management sorting facility, The Denver Post identified some of the top mistakes well-meaning recyclers make.²

Six Top Recycling Mistakes

Recycling requirements vary by municipality, but in general, you can use these suggestions from Denver, Colorado, to determine if you're making common recycling mistakes. To verify the recycling guidelines in your area, contact your local facility.

- 1. Plastic bags shouldn't go into your recycling bin** — Municipal recycling facilities often do not recycle plastic bags, which can get caught in their machinery and cause damage. Many grocery stores, however, have collection bins where you can drop off plastic bags to be recycled.
- 2. Avoiding putting your recyclables into trash bags** — If you put your recyclables into closed trash bags, they'll get thrown straight into the trash. This is because sorters don't have time to open them, and they're also considered to be a safety hazard.
- 3. Greasy, wet or food-soiled items cannot be recycled** — Grease, liquids (even water) and food are considered contaminants. If they make it down the sorting line without being tossed out, they can contaminate an entire load of recyclables, causing it to be thrown out. Examples of items that cannot be recycled include:
 - Foil potato chip bags
 - Greasy pizza boxes (if you rip off the unsoiled cardboard lid, that can be recycled)
 - Foil lids from yogurt containers (however, foil food trays and pie tins may be accepted as long as you remove as much food as possible)
 - Paper cups with shiny coatings, such as hot-serve coffee cups
 - Paper food bowls with plastic lining (such as those used for [Chipotle](#) burrito bowls)

4. **Very small items cannot be recycled** – The Denver Post described it as "anything smaller than a Post-it note" cannot be recycled, because it's too small to be sorted properly. This includes plastic bottle caps, unless you screw them onto the bottle (be sure to empty all liquid out first, or the bottle will be discarded).
5. **Don't flatten milk cartons** – Waxy milk cartons can be recycled, but 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.
6. **These items can't be recycled** – Anything that enters a recycling center that cannot be recycled is considered a contaminant and will be thrown out. If too many contaminants are found in a bundle of recyclables, it runs the risk of being rejected. Examples of non-recyclable items in Denver include:

Scrap metal	Plastic that does not hold a shape
Christmas tree lights	Wire hangers
Electronics (there are specialized centers for this)	Auto parts
Propane tanks	Mattresses
Bowling balls	Bicycles

Reducing Food Waste via Composting Is Another Form of Recycling

Food waste is actually the largest component of waste sent to U.S. landfills, making up 24% of the waste stream, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).³

Yard trimmings make up another 7.21%. When combined, this organic waste makes up the largest share of U.S. trash, more than any other material, including paper and plastic.

In all, the food waste alone amounts to more than 35 million tons of waste entering U.S. landfills every year.

Fortunately, food recycling, also known as composting, is catching on throughout the U.S. Residential food composting programs have been tested in a number of U.S. cities, including New York City, Austin and Milwaukee, and more than 180 communities collect food waste from residences.⁴

In 2013, there were about 3,560 large-scale community composting programs in the U.S.⁵ Many of the programs started out by allowing residents to add food scraps to their yard waste recycling bins, but some areas, including New York City, also have food-scrap drop-off sites.

San Francisco was the first U.S. city to make composting food waste mandatory – back in 2009 – as part of a zero-waste initiative to send little to no materials to landfills by 2020. In 2013, San Francisco has succeeded in recycling or composting about 80% of its waste, compared to just 15% in New York City.⁶

Companies Save Money by Reducing Food Waste

A report by Champions 12.3, a coalition of executives from governments, businesses, international organizations, research institutions, farmer groups and civil society working to reduce food loss and waste, found that businesses have significant financial incentive to reduce food waste, saving an average \$14 for every \$1 spent toward that end.⁷

The report⁸ noted that "[food waste] amounts to economic losses of \$940 billion per year," and while some companies, like Kellogg, are getting involved by revamping confusing food expiration dates or improving food production and delivery processes, businesses can get involved in composting, too.

North Carolina (NC) State University Extension has a publication on how to start compost bins at summer camps and childcare centers, for instance, not only reducing food and yard waste but also educating children in the process.

"Composting is an easy, natural way to recycle and absolutely fascinates children as they begin to understand nature as a process of transformation," NC State explains.⁹ The EPA also maintains success stories from businesses that have saved money by implementing composting programs. Among them:¹⁰

- New Seasons Markets, which operates 12 grocery stores in the Pacific Northwest, has increased the amount of organic materials, including food waste, composted by 109% since 2006. Since 2011, they've kept more than 2,410 tons of food out of landfills and saved more than \$25,000 in waste expenses.
- Petco Park, a baseball park in San Diego, California, started a food composting program in 2005. In 2011, they diverted 164 tons of waste from landfills and have saved \$75,000 since 2005.
- Middlebury College, in Middlebury, Vermont, started a food waste composting program in 1993. Ninety percent of their food waste (370 tons) was composted on campus in 2011, saving them more than \$100,000 in landfill fees (from composting and recycling).

It's Easier to Compost Than You Think

Composting may sound intimidating at first, but it's actually incredibly easy and, when done correctly, poses little risk of unpleasant odors or attracting rodents or other pests.

"If you create the proper balance of materials, you'll have aerobic conditions, and the microorganisms that thrive there break down scraps with little to no odor," says Darby Hoover, senior resource specialist in the National Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) Food and Agriculture program.¹¹ The formula she refers to is 2 to 3 parts "browns" to 1 part "greens," such as:

Browns (2 to 3 parts)

Shredded newspaper and other paper

Greens (1 part)

Fruit and vegetable scraps

Browns (2 to 3 parts)

Greens (1 part)

Dead leaves

Breads and grains

Food-soiled paper (but not coated paper)

Coffee grounds and filters, tea bags

Cardboard

Grass clippings

Crushed eggshells

You'll first need a space to compost, such as a fenced-off corner of your yard or a bin made for the purpose. The latter 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. You can even compost if you live in an apartment. According to NRDC, "Indoor bins stocked with red worms, critters you can order online, process food scraps in a smaller space."¹²

Turning Kitchen Scraps Into Valuable Organic Matter

Keep a small compost pail in your kitchen to collect scraps, then empty it into your compost bin daily. As you dump food scraps into your bin, try to cover it up with a layer of leaves or yard clippings to discourage attracting animals. You can also add in a sprinkling of soil to introduce beneficial organisms.¹³

Next, you simply wait for the materials to break down, giving your bin a tumble or turn over once a week or so. You may need to add a bit of water on occasion to keep the moisture level damp, similar to a wrung-out sponge.

As for what can't be composted, although some community-wide composting programs accept meat, dairy and certain plastics, you shouldn't put these items in your backyard compost bin. Other items to avoid include eggs (the shells are fine), oils or grease, meat or fish bones, pet feces, and litter or yard trimmings that have been treated with pesticides.¹⁴

The next question is what to do with the "black gold" you've created. If you garden, add compost to your flowerbeds and vegetable garden. You can also add it to houseplants and even onto your lawn. If you don't have a yard to use up your compost, don't let that stop you. NRDC recommends "[sharing] the bounty by offering friends, the whole office, or your children's school a free donation. Another tactic is guerrilla composting – dump some compost at the base of street trees."¹⁵

Sources and References

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