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## Keep Your Money Refill, don't replace

**By Tom Watson**  
*Special to The Seattle Times*

Sometimes saving money and helping the environment can fit together like ... well, like the way the printer ink cartridge fits into your computer printer.

If you've been buying brand-name ink cartridges for your printer, you've surely noticed the high prices. Critics have said that, ounce-for-ounce, printer ink often costs more than perfume.

But you can save up to 50 percent — and help reduce waste and conserve resources — by purchasing refilled or remanufactured cartridges. You have an increasing number of choices now, so if you've shied away from those lower-cost alternatives in the past, it's time to give them another look.

First, a quick primer on printers. Many households and small businesses have color inkjet printers, which use liquid ink. Offices commonly use laser printers that use powdery toners.

Major inkjet printer manufacturers attract buyers with rock-bottom prices — as low as \$30 for a new printer. Once you buy the printer, you need cartridges, and that's where companies make the bulk of their profits. The original manufacturer's replacement ink cartridge for that \$30 printer may cost you — about \$30.

It takes 2-½ ounces of oil to produce the plastic in a new inkjet cartridge, and 3-½ quarts of oil to make a toner cartridge, says Recharger Magazine, a trade journal for the cartridge reuse industry. More than 250 million inkjet and toner cartridges are disposed of in the U.S. every year, according to Recharger.

And there's really no need to throw them out. Laser toner cartridges are reusable, and most inkjet cartridges can also be refilled and reused a half-dozen times or more.



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The printer manufacturers try to discourage this, by issuing dire warnings of the risks of using other inks in their printers, frequently changing the cartridge technology and even taking remanufacturers and refillers to court.

But with all the money at stake, entrepreneurs have jumped in. Refill shops are the latest trend. At these shops, you can have your old ink cartridge refilled on the spot, or turn in your cartridge and buy an identical one that they've already refilled. Three national chains of refill shops have a total of 14 stores in the Puget Sound area: Cartridge World ([www.cartridgeworldusa.com](http://www.cartridgeworldusa.com)), Island Ink-Jet ([www.islandinkjet.com](http://www.islandinkjet.com)) and Rapid Refill Ink ([www.rapidrefillink.com](http://www.rapidrefillink.com)). They also sell remanufactured toner cartridges.

National office-supply and drugstore chains have also gotten into the act. Office Depot, OfficeMax and Walgreens are testing inkjet-refill service at selected stores around the country, and will likely roll out the service nationally soon.

The printer manufacturers insist that their printers perform better with their own inks. Tests by Consumer Reports in 2004 and 2005 indicated that the printer manufacturer's brands do perform best overall, but that some off-brands may be fine for basic printing. Consumer Reports did not test the newer refill chains.

Those refill chains say the quality of their cartridges is higher than remanufactured cartridges that have previously been available. All three of the major refill chains with local stores guarantee their cartridges. In some cases, the chains test refilled cartridges before they sell them.

If you use your printer mainly for things like maps, recipes and the kids' homework, refilled cartridges should work just fine. When I replaced a black ink cartridge in my home printer with one that had been refilled by a local chain, I couldn't tell the difference. But for photos you're going to keep for generations, you may want to use the brand-name cartridges.

Because used inkjet and toner printer cartridges have so much value for the refilling and remanufacturing markets, you should never throw them away. Many schools and nonprofits collect cartridges for fundraisers, and some stores also accept them at no charge. For listings of cartridge collection programs and locations, see the King County "What do I do with?" Web site ([www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw](http://www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw)) and select "Printing Cartridges."

With all this activity, it's a golden age of reuse for printer cartridges. Take advantage of it now, because with all the money at stake, and the courts involved, the picture could change quickly.

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