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EcoConsumer

Transparent answers on recycling glass

The ins and outs of glass recycling aren't always so clear. Glass bottles get broken when they're recycled, but you don't want to break...

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

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Glass bottles get broken when they're recycled, but you don't want to break them too soon. Other types of glass should not be recycled with glass bottles. Refilling returnable glass bottles makes sense environmentally, but beverage companies rarely do it anymore.

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Glass recycling is a local success story nonetheless, even as it illustrates the complexities of modern recycling.

Q: I've heard that broken pieces from a glass bottle or jar should not go in the recycling bin, but why is that?

A: Broken glass in your bin could pose a safety hazard to recycling workers. If you break a bottle, those shards should be carefully bagged and put in the garbage.

Q: So what exactly happens to my bottles when I recycle them?

A: Many glass bottles collected regionally become wine bottles at a bottle-making facility in South Seattle. Opened in 1931, this plant is now called Verallia and is owned by the French company Saint-Gobain.

The first stop for those old bottles, however, is usually the 2-year-old eCullet processing plant next door to Verallia. Crushed recycled glass is called cullet, and at eCullet they pulverize and clean the bottle glass and use high-tech equipment to identify and sort it into the green, brown and clear colors of cullet required for glass-bottle manufacturing.

Recycled crushed glass may also be used in construction and filtration, to substitute for sand, for example.

Q: What are the benefits of glass-bottle recycling?

A: Cullet costs less than other materials in new bottles such as sand, soda ash and limestone, so that helps bottle manufacturers. Cullet also melts at a lower temperature, conserving energy. Keeping all that heavy glass out of the landfill is an additional environmental plus.

Q: Refilling bottles still seems much greener because they don't have to make a new bottle. What happened to refilling?

A: Many of us remember returning beer or pop bottles to the store to reclaim the deposit. The old Rainier Brewery in South Seattle sterilized and refilled bottles as recently as the early 1990s.

Although refilling of beer bottles is still commonplace in Canada and Europe, the mainstream beverage and grocery industries in the U.S. rejected returnables years ago. For various reasons, especially the logistics of maintaining bottle-washing and deposit systems, they would rather sell their products in new bottles.

Q: Do any bottles still get refilled around here?

A: A few small companies keep refilling alive. For example, Seattle's Schooner Exact Brewing sells its beer in returnable glass jugs, and Golden Glen Creamery in Skagit County offers milk in returnable bottles. These and several other products using refillable bottles often can be found at grocery co-ops and farmers markets.

Q: Even if bottles are just recycled, wouldn't it be better to have a law in our state requiring refundable deposits of a few cents for glass bottles and other beverage containers?

A: Many environmentalists think so. In 1972, Oregon became the first state to enact a deposit law, or "bottle bill," and the 10 states with those laws have seen significant litter reduction. Deposit laws also increase recycling, but the beverage and grocery industries strongly oppose them.

Q: Can I recycle other types of glass besides bottles?

A: Drinking glasses, cookware, window glass, mirrors and light bulbs use different additives than container glass. Those items are considered contaminants in glass-bottle recycling and should not be put in your recycling bin. However, a few companies such as Bedrock Industries in Seattle and TriVistro in Kent take clean window glass and sometimes other glass for recycling.

As a packaging material, glass leads a precarious existence. Many products have converted to plastic. Glass recycling is struggling in parts of the nation where markets for collected bottles have disappeared. But glass still has legions of supporters. Here in our region, at least, you can break it but it won't go away.

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