

Columnists

Originally published Friday, May 18, 2012 at 3:09 PM

Old clothes, even torn and stained, can be recycled

The clothes you used to love but no longer wear do have value, even if they're torn or stained. But if they're mildewed, toss them out.

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Special to The Seattle Times

Valuable items you no longer need hang in your closet, waiting for a new life.

Charities and recyclers lust after your unwanted clothing and textiles. But old clothing isn't like most other recyclable and reusable items. With all the variations in style, quality and condition, no two pieces of old clothing are the same. This presents challenges and rewards for textile recyclers as well as people getting rid of old clothes.

Q: I know I can donate clothes in good shape, but what about tattered items that can't be resold in thrift stores?

A: Many clothing-collection programs now want virtually all textiles even if they are torn or stained. This includes clothes, accessories, shoes, linens, towels and curtains.

The best items get resold in stores, and charities send everything else they collect to recyclers. Processing operations around the world sort scrap clothing and textiles so they can be recycled into rags, stuffing, padding, insulation and other products.

Check with charity-collection programs directly because some may still only want donations of clothes they can resell to the public, to make their sorting easier. King County provides a partial list of collection options for consumers at seati.ms/Jn8cBH. A few cities, such as Issaquah, accept clothing and textiles in plastic bags in their curbside-recycling program.

Q: Which clothes and textiles can't I donate?

A: Never donate wet or mildewed items, or textiles with paint or chemicals on them. One of the biggest challenges of donating clothes in the Northwest is keeping them dry. Use plastic bags when you take clothes to donation locations or when you put them on the porch for pickup. When storing clothes in your basement, use airtight-plastic containers to prevent moisture and mildew.

Q: What are the benefits of reusing and recycling textiles?

A: Donations of clothing and textiles fund charity programs and generate hundreds of thousands of jobs in the U.S. and globally. Reusing clothing conserves resources and reduces the use of pesticides to grow cotton.

Reducing textile waste can also extend the life span of landfills. More than 3 percent of all residential waste going into King County's Cedar Hills Landfill in Maple Valley consists of clothing and textiles, not including carpet.

Q: How about some practical tips, to make sure charities or others get the highest benefit from my donated clothes?

A: If you haven't worn something in two years, give it up. Swapping clothes with family members and friends is a fun way to save money, or you can sell your best unwanted clothes through consignment stores or at garage sales.

For charitable donations of clothing, choose an organization whose work you admire. Some charities partner with private companies who help collect or sell the donated items for a profit, so consider whether that makes a difference to you.

When a natural disaster occurs, don't send disaster-relief agencies direct donations of clothing or blankets. They typically get overwhelmed with donated clothing and can't effectively process it all.

Q: Don't we buy and toss out a lot more clothes than we used to?

A: Absolutely. Twenty years ago, an average American bought fewer than 30 pieces of clothing per year, but today the average is about 60 items. Major retailers now commonly sell selected new clothing at prices so low, such as \$3 for a T-shirt, that people might feel fine about wearing an item just a couple of times and getting rid of it.

Q: How can we reduce overconsumption of clothing and household textiles?

A: Spend a little more to buy higher-quality items that will last longer, which also makes them more desirable to charities when you donate them. Avoid impulsive clothing purchases. Buy clothes you can easily mix and match. Obsessively care for your favorite clothes to avoid shrinking or staining them.

Find clothes you love, possibly used clothes from a thrift store, and wear them well. But when your clothes outwear their welcome, don't just leave them hanging.

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