

Columnists

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Why are there unrecyclables and other processing questions

Old or broken drinking glasses. Burned-out incandescent light bulbs. Empty prescription-medicine vials. These are on an increasingly shortlist...

By Tom Watson

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Old or broken drinking glasses. Burned-out incandescent light bulbs. Empty prescription-medicine vials. These are on an increasingly shortlist of common waste items that we can't put in our residential curbside recycling bin.

They are the unrecyclables.

That sounds almost criminal, doesn't it? Recycling has become so ingrained here in the Seattle area that we now expect to be able to recycle everything. When we can't recycle something, we want to know why.

Q: Let's start with the big picture. Why should there be any unrecyclables? Isn't nearly everything technically recyclable?

A: Yes, but the key word is "technically." Recycling only makes sense in the real world when a collected material can be turned into a desirable product or packaging material in a cost-effective way. Unrecyclables don't fit those criteria.

Because the hauling companies that pick up our recyclables have various buyers for their collected materials, unrecyclables vary in different cities and regions.

Q: Why are plastic prescription-drug vials considered unrecyclable, when some of them even have the recycling symbol on them?

A: That common recycling symbol (three "chasing arrows," with a number inside) on many plastic items can be misleading. It means only that an item technically could be recycled, not that you can actually recycle it in a local program.

Most Seattle-area residential recycling-collection programs don't accept those common medicine vials, which are usually see-through orange. Seattle Public Utilities says prescription vials are too brittle and can contaminate other plastic recycling.

However, a few in-store collection programs may accept specific types of drug vials for recycling, which just goes to show that recyclability is a moving target.

You can always reuse those empty vials, to keep paper clips in for example. Empty plastic medicine bottles for nonprescription drugs such as aspirin or vitamins can go in your home-

recycling bin.

Q: What about glass?

A: Many recycling programs accept unbroken glass bottles and jars (broken glass endangers workers). However, almost no residential-recycling programs want other types of glass, including drinking glasses, windows, mirrors or light bulbs.

Those have different properties than glass bottles and can contaminate glass-bottle recycling. Donate reusable items such as drinking glasses and mirrors to charities or thrift stores.

If you feel creative, turn burned-out incandescent light bulbs into festive holiday ornaments by painting them and attaching a string. Fluorescent light bulbs, including compact fluorescents, must be recycled at designated collection locations because they contain small amounts of mercury.

King County's "What Do I Do With?" (WDIDW) website (kingcounty.gov/WhatDoIDoWith) lists recycling-collection locations for fluorescent light bulbs and all kinds of other items you can't put in your home recycling bin.

Q: Can Styrofoam be recycled?

A: Most local residential-recycling programs do not accept items made of polystyrene, commonly called Styrofoam. Polystyrene chunks used for packaging are collected at a few locations in the Puget Sound area, including Styro Recycle (StyroRecycle.com) in Renton.

Several local businesses accept clean polystyrene packing peanuts to reuse them for shipping. Check WDIDW under "Plastic" for locations in King County.

Q: How about plastic or foil candy wrappers and chip bags?

A: No municipal residential-recycling programs accept these. Some Seattle-area schools and nonprofits collect candy and snack packaging through programs offered by New Jersey-based TerraCycle, a for-profit company. TerraCycle funds these recycling programs through promotional partnerships with brands such as M&M's.

Q: Where can I find out exactly which items my local recycling program accepts?

A: Check with your recycling hauler or city. Most have detailed lists on their websites.

Q: How can unrecyclables get turned into recyclables?

A: Manufacturers need to take responsibility for their products and packaging and make sure they are easily recyclable. This may require manufacturers to provide no-strings-attached funding for recycling collection and processing.

Recyclability isn't everything. Reducing and reusing trumps recycling. But recycling certainly beats landfilling, and if a product or packaging is only "technically" recyclable, that doesn't help consumers. We're most likely to recycle when it's as easy as throwing something away.

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