

Homes & Real Estate

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EcoConsumer | Making sense of plastics recycling at home

Domestic squabbles frequently occur about whether plastic items are recyclable. Even if you ask plastics-recycling experts, you may get different answers. But don't give up on plastics recycling. Follow these tips to make it easier at home.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

Plastics have been collected for recycling from Seattle area homes for more than 25 years. Yet plastics recycling still confuses many of us.

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But don't give up on plastics recycling. Follow these tips to make it easier at home.

Take charge

Plastics recycling is more complicated than most types of recycling because so many types of plastic exist, and so many chemicals are used in plastic packaging and products.

The process of recycling collected waste plastics into new products and packaging is a constant challenge for companies, especially financially.

But that's not the public's fault. We need to make our home plastics-recycling collection work for us. Read the information about plastics recycling that's available from your collection company or local government. If it's unclear, contact them with questions.

Keep things simple when you explain recycling in your household, and don't expect recycling perfection from your children. If you're not sure about a certain item, don't agonize over it. It's OK to throw that one in the garbage.

Recycling shouldn't be a time-consuming chore. It's a service and a waste-reduction opportunity. Do it on your own terms.

Ignore the numbers

This advice has been given for years, but many people are still confused by the numbers on plastic containers and other plastic items. It's the number 1 through 7, usually surrounded by the "chasing-arrows" recycling symbol.

But that number doesn't necessarily mean you can recycle that plastic item at home. It only means

it's technically possible to recycle it.

In an effort to make plastics recycling simpler, most residential recycling programs now accept plastics by shape or type, not by number. City of Seattle recycling managers say you can put “all plastic bottles, tubs and containers” in your home recycling cart.

Don't go overboard

Astounded visitors have been known to say, “In Seattle, they wash their garbage before they throw it away!” But you don't need to meticulously wash and scrub your plastic containers before you toss them in the recycling bin. That wastes water.

A very light rinse is usually all you need. Just don't leave big globs of food. For plastic plant pots (now recyclable in many programs), tap out the soil residue, or swipe out the pot with a rag.

If a plastic container can't be cleaned out easily, put that one in the garbage.

Take it outside

Some plastic items not accepted in your home-recycling program can be recycled other places. For example, that big chunk of polystyrene (commonly called Styrofoam) packing material shouldn't be put in your recycling cart, even if it has a number 6 and the recycling arrows on it.

But two recycling businesses — Styro Recycle in Renton and ECO Foam Recyclers in Woodinville — accept it at several area locations. Check King County's “What Do I Do With...?” website (your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste/wdidw) for recycling locations for polystyrene and other plastics.

Buy with a keen eye

If you buy fewer products in single-use plastic containers, such as bottled water, you'll save money and won't have to deal with the recycling. Take reusable water bottles with you whenever possible.

Yogurt tubs and other food containers made from polypropylene work well for storing leftovers.

Plastic products such as kitchen utensils and toys are hardly ever accepted for recycling, even when labeled “recyclable,” so buy high-quality products that will last longer.

See the big picture

Try to be understanding when governments and recycling-collection companies change the plastics-recycling rules, or have different rules in different places. They want to make recycling easier, but they also need to meet the requirements of the companies that process the collected materials and turn them into new products.

Many companies strive to make their packaging and products easier to recycle and more sustainable. If you have a problem with unrecyclable or wasteful plastic packaging, be sure to let companies know.

Recycling plastics isn't your job alone, but it's worth doing. Even with all its challenges, recycling plastics still beats trashing them.

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