



Recycling in the Home

Recycling is an effective way of saving energy, conserving raw materials, reducing landfill waste and limiting the amount of pollutants released into our environment. This tipsheet tells you how.

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What is Recycling?

We are so often told of the benefits of 'recycling' but rarely told what the term actually means. A brief definition of recycling would simply be: 'the process of reusing materials that may otherwise have been considered as waste.' This is most often used to describe the industrial process of breaking down used materials such as newspapers, glass bottles or aluminium cans, into a substance that is reused to make a different product or more of the original.

Why bother?

Industrial processes and products use and produce chemicals and toxic materials that can poison our soil, water supply, food chain and eventually ourselves. On top of this, the pollution from burning fossil fuels to produce and transport your goods causes air pollution and increases the rate of global warming. Add to this the increasing practical problem of dumping waste into rapidly filling landfill sites – households produce 26 million tonnes of waste every year in the UK – and you can see why recycling is a good idea.

How do we do it?

First of all it is worth noting that recycling is less environmentally friendly than reuse or repair – it is an industrial process that itself uses energy. Your first choice should always be to reuse or repair things wherever possible. And if you can't repair something yourself, find someone who can. Parts of things can often be rescued from something which must be disposed of – such as plugs from old electrical equipment. With a bit of imagination things can also be reused as something else – from tyres as compost bins to works of art made from old tea bags! Invest in products that are durable, have few disposable parts, are returnable or refillable, can run off the mains (or rechargeable batteries), have no excess packaging and are made from materials that can easily be recycled in your area. If something cannot be reused or repaired it should then be recycled. Over 70% of household waste in our dustbins can be recycled, yet the amount of waste we currently recycle in the UK stands at only 8%. And there is no longer any excuse – recycling facilities have improved considerably over the last few years with an increasing number of local authorities taking an increasing number of materials. Cans, tins, glass, paper and fabrics can almost always be taken to your nearest recycling point, usually in town centres or outside supermarkets. **Fabrics** should be taken to charity shops if no clothing banks are available - and remember to tie old shoes together. **Glass** bottles and jars should be rinsed before being put in the banks and their metal or plastic tops, corks and rings removed. Avoid putting light bulbs, cookware such as Pyrex and window glass into the



glass containers. Wash and crush any cans and tins where possible (but don't crush aerosol cans), dividing **aluminium** and **steel**, which are often collected separately – aluminium is light, has a shiny silver base and does not stick to a magnet. Milk bottle tops, tops of cartons, baking and freezing trays, kitchen foil, cigarette and tobacco foil are also aluminium and recyclable. Aluminium production is particularly energy intensive so recycling brings significant environmental gains. **Paper** recycling by local authorities is available for flat paper such as newspapers and magazines. Tissues, kitchen roll and other non-flat paper waste should be composted along with cardboard (see organic waste). Stopping junk mail being posted to your house is a good way of reducing paper waste – contact the Mailing Preference Service to remove your name from mailing lists. **Mixed packaging** such as foil or wax-lined milk and juice cartons cannot be recycled or composted at present and so must be binned. If there isn't a recycling point near you or you're just not sure where it is, contact the Recycling Officer at your Local Authority – the organisation Waste Watch can supply you with the contact number. Some areas do have kerbside recycling schemes, where recyclable material can be left outside with other rubbish to be collected – usually in a separate container provided by the scheme.

But what about everything else?

Most people are aware of the opportunities for recycling glass, paper, cans, tins, paper and fabrics. Yet there are an infinite number of other products and materials for which recycling schemes have yet to be fully developed. In some cases though, recycling is still a possibility. Listed below are some of the products and materials that can be recycled (mostly by your local authority) with minimum effort. For everything else that you might use in your home, the same common sense rules apply – reduce the amount you use, reuse things where possible and think about repairing before you consign things to the dustbin. And remember, someone else may find use in something you cannot – charity and bric-a-brac shops may well be able to take things off your hands. The Charities Aid Foundation publish a directory listing materials that charities will collect.

Plastic has long been the hardest thing to recycle. In the UK only 6% of plastic waste is recycled compared to 28% of aluminium cans. Most of our plastic recycling is 'process scrap' from industry. But 'post-use' plastic recycling is on the increase. About 40% of local authorities now have plastic bottle recycling schemes and there are kerbside collections of plastic for over 2.7 million households. The

main types of plastic are most commonly coded by numbers (1,2,3 etc) but you may also see corresponding letters such as PET, HDPE, PVC, LDPE, PP and PS – both numbers and letters should be marked on the different plastic recycling banks.

Electrical Equipment constitutes an estimated 1 million tonnes of waste every year in the UK - 39% of which is large household appliances (white goods). Many of these items contain toxic substances. The complex nature of equipment, as well as the mixtures of materials involved, make recycling more difficult. Large household goods such as fridges and cookers are easier to recycle than smaller, more complex items, and your council may well collect these for you. Reuse schemes are a better option and often the only one. In addition to second hand outlets, some local authorities, community schemes and commercial organisations will accept or even buy your old IT equipment. Bytes Twice is perhaps the best organisation to contact. Major mobile phone manufacturers have also begun a 'take back' scheme enabling the 14 million users in the UK to return phones, batteries and accessories to one of 400 shops or by post. Contact your local mobile phone shop or network operator for details.

Batteries contain heavy metals which can cause serious pollution problems, yet every year we dispose of over 400 million. Facilities for recycling domestic batteries in the UK are minimal but there are well established systems for reclaiming lead acid batteries, used in vehicles, at garages, Civic Amenity Sites and Recycling Centres. Some local authorities (Sutton, Sheffield, Wolverhampton) do collect domestic batteries as hazardous waste and there are manufacturers who provide special incentives to encourage customers to return their own brand of batteries. These include: *Bosch, Draper Tools, Pag* and *Varta*. Better still, use the mains where possible or use rechargeable batteries, especially the new RAM rechargeables which contain no mercury or cadmium.

Cars are usually sold to a vehicle dismantler at the end of their working life. Of the 1.8 million cars and vans scrapped in the UK each year, 74% are currently recycled, mainly through the reuse of spare parts or through metals recovery. This still leaves some 490,000 tonnes of remaining material to be buried in landfill sites every year. Problems in the UK lie with unlicensed vehicle dismantlers who gain a competitive advantage by avoiding the costs involved with environmental standards – particularly with the draining of hazardous vehicle fluids. The best thing to do is to ensure that your car is scrapped by a licensed dismantler. Regular maintenance also prolongs a car's life, reduces pollution and energy use, and cuts the impact of disposal. A UK study suggests that savings of 15% are possible if you check your tyres and oil frequently.

Hazardous waste from households, (paint, paint stripper, chemical-based floor and oven cleaners, solvents and garden chemicals) poses real risks to soil and groundwater supplies if poured down the drain or buried in landfill. It is important to buy non-toxic substitutes where possible and to buy only the amount that is really necessary. Label and keep anything left for future use or donate to neighbours, community groups or charity organisations. If you really have no use for a substance, responsibility for its safe disposal comes under the jurisdiction of your local council. Take it to a Civic Amenity Site if facilities exist, or contact your Recycling Officer.

Organic waste, which includes paper and cardboard as well as food scraps, makes up a total of 30% of domestic refuse discarded each year. Organic waste is a particular problem in landfill sites because it putrefies rather than breaking down, contaminating water supplies and releasing dangerous ozone depleting gases such as methane. On top of this, its high water content makes it heavy and inefficient to transport. Composting your paper, cardboard, food waste and grass clippings will bring far more environmental gains than recycling glass, steel or plastic. Composting is the natural way to return the vital nutrients of organic waste back to the soil, helping the growth of your flowers and vegetables in the process. Compost bins are widely available in garden centres but can also be made at home very easily – the organisation HDRA and CAT's own tipsheet are good sources of information.

Wood waste generated by householders comes mainly from old furniture, fencing and DIY offcuts rather than packaging. Wood waste from the garden such as tree branches can be composted but is best put in a separate compost bin to plate waste and grass clippings (or the process can take much longer). The Furniture Recycling Project may be able to put you in touch with someone who can take your old furniture but your local authority should be contacted about domestic wood waste, some do provide timber recycling points at Civic Amenity Sites.

And is that it?

Not quite – you can back up those good recycling habits by buying recycled products. A product has not actually been recycled until it is being used again. Unless people buy recycled products, there is little incentive for manufacturers to use the recycled materials in their production processes. There are a huge range of products available ranging from recycled toilet paper to ink cartridges to electrical equipment. Products labelled 100% recycled are clearly the best choice and it is important to remember to check that the product is not just recyclable – there is an important difference. All paper products are available from recycled sources and an increasing number of glass products are also becoming available as well as plastic products such as garden accessories, flooring, office accessories, fibre-fill duvets and even fleece jackets, hats and gloves.

Contacts

Waste Watch is by far the best dedicated recycling information service that the UK has to offer – they have a hotline on 0870 243 0136, a fax on 0207 253 5962 and a website at www.waste-watch.org.uk. Alternatively, write to: Waste Watch, Europa House, Ground Floor, 13-17 Ironmonger Row, London, EC1V 3QG.

Charities Aid Foundation 0732 771 333.

Write to: 48 Pembury Road, Tonbridge, Kent, TN9 2JD.

Save Waste And Prosper Ltd. 0113 243 8777.

Write to: c/o SWAP, 74 Kirkgate, Leeds, LS2 7DJ.

British Battery Manufacturers Association 0207 838 4878.

Write to: 26 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0GT.

Henry Doubleday Research Association 0247 303 517.

Write to: National Centre for Organic Gardening,

Ryton-on-Dunsmore, Coventry, CV8 3LG.

The Mailing Preference Service

Freepost 22, London W1E 7EZ.

Furniture Recycling Network 0116 254 5283.

Write to: c/o SOFA, Unit 3, Pilot House, 41 King Street, Leicester, Leics, LE1 6RN.