

The Green Space: You Can Recycle What?!

Over the years, you have probably become a grand master of the basics of recycling. You can sort paper, metal, and plastics with the best of them, and can tell the difference between high-density polyethylene and polyethylene terephthalate from 20 feet away. Kids these days have it so much easier than you ever did! With today's high-tech sorting equipment, they often do not even have to separate their metal from their plastics.



Instead of bemoaning how easy today's generation has it when it comes to recycling, maybe it is time to raise the bar to a whole new level. Come explore the wilder fringes of recycling. Review the list of unusual items that you may not recognize as potentially recyclable. Some may require a little more knowledge and effort than merely knowing which bin to toss them into, but with any luck, you will be scrutinizing your trash more closely than ever before. Pass along this information at your next get-together and watch jaws drop in amazement! You will look like a green genius.

- Polystyrene Packing Peanuts. While they technically cannot be recycled into new packing peanuts, they can be reused (which, along with Reduce, is one of those important Rs). Reuse of packing peanuts by businesses can divert significant amounts from landfills. Contact the Plastic Loose Fill Council's [Peanut Hotline](#) (800-828-2214) to find out where you can drop off your supply for reuse. If you are lucky, the peanuts you have on hand are made from biodegradable cornstarch. Toss a few into water to check. If they dissolve, they should do the same in a landfill or, better yet, in your compost bin!
- Crayons. Let us "draw" attention to the fact that throwing out crayons puts a lot of petroleum-based material into landfills. Before they spend another year in the bottom of the toy box, you can collect all of those discarded crayons and send them to a better place. Companies such as LAF Lines, Ltd. (800-561-0922) and [Crazy Crayons](#) (800-561-0922) accept old crayons and melt them into new ones. There is no need to remove the wrappers first; leaving them on makes it easier for the companies to sort the *Sky Blue* from the *Robin's Egg Blue*, and after sorting, the wrappers are used to make fire-starters.
- CDs and DVDs. Given their complex mixture of aluminum, polycarbonate, dyes, lacquers and, in some cases, gold, it is extremely difficult to recycle CDs and DVDs. As a result, most of them end up as trash. This means not only the hits in your collection that are just too scratched to play any more, but also the millions of obsolete software discs that are disposed of in bulk, defective discs that are scrapped by manufacturers, and promotional discs that are mass-mailed to consumers but never used. Companies, such as [CD Recycling Center of America](#) (603-894-5553) and [GreenDisc](#) (800-305-3475), can clean, grind, blend, and compound the discs into a high-quality plastic that has use in automotive parts, office equipment, and electrical cable insulation.
- Carpeting. According to the Carpet America Recovery Effort (CARE), approximately five billion pounds of carpet was sent to landfills in 2003. Depending on the type of fiber, your old shag wall-to-wall carpet could potentially become composite lumber, roofing shingles, or railroad ties. To find a carpet reclamation center near you, visit the [CARE Web site](#).
- Holiday Lights. If these festive decorations have lost their twinkle, there is at least one company that will collect them. The lights are put through a grinder and their component parts (glass, copper, plastic) are sorted and recycled. Contact [Holiday LEDs](#) (866-492-4330) for further information.
- Wine Corks. As long as they are truly corks and not made of plastic, wine corks are biodegradable and perfectly suitable for the compost bin. If you find that you have more of them on hand than your compost bin can handle, [Yem & Hart, Ltd.](#) in Fredericktown, MO (573-783-5434) accepts them for recycling into tiles for flooring and wall coverings.
- Sponges. This one takes a little forethought, because sponges made from man-made materials can not be recycled. Natural sea sponges and sponges made from vegetable cellulose, however, are biodegradable—so toss them in with the compost. Just be sure to rinse any cleaning chemicals from them first.
- Cell Phones. This may take just a bit of detective work on your part, but only because the number of avenues for reusing or recycling your old cell phone is growing. Unfortunately, according to the U.S. EPA, only about 10% of cell phones are actually recycled. However, several major electronics retailers will accept your old donated cell phone and many charitable organizations will refurbish your old phone for a variety of needy recipients.

You have been taught the paper, metal, and #1 or #2 plastics recycling routine for so long that it can be difficult to know how to respond to the occasional item that does not fit easily into one of those categories. At those moments, it is important to be creative and think outside the bin. When an item no longer meets your needs or has reached the end of its useful life, a bit of careful consideration and research can go a long way toward diverting it from the landfill.

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