



## CENTER FOR EARTH LEADERSHIP FACT SHEETS

# Moving Toward Zero Waste

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*If you're putting out a full-size can of garbage a week, you're missing an opportunity to lighten the load on the planet. Here's a step-by-step approach to reduce waste.*

### STEP ONE – RECYCLING CURBSIDE

The first step is to recycle everything your garbage hauler or recycler will take. In many communities that means:

Newspaper  
Scrap Paper/Phone Books  
Cardboard/Brown Bags

Magazines  
Glass Containers  
Aluminum

Tin Cans  
Scrap Metal  
Yard Debris

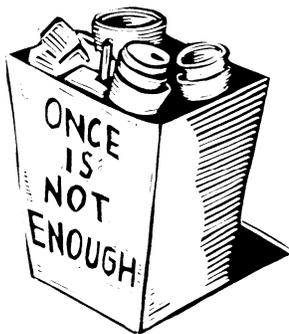
Scrap paper does not include paper towels and napkins, but otherwise it's very inclusive. Envelopes with plastic windows or gummed labels are acceptable. As long as the paper isn't coated with plastic, wax, carbon, or foil, it's probably okay. Watch out for Christmas card envelopes and wrapping paper that may be decorated with foil. Paper cartons containing refrigerated food are often covered with plastic so it's best not to include them. Sometimes it's possible to separate the plastic liner from a container, as in frozen juice concentrate cans (soak with water first) or pet food bags, so the paper can go into scrap.

If the above items are not collected curbside in your community, call your local government to find out whether there are any drop-off centers where you can take them.

### STEP TWO – RECYCLING AT DROP-OFF SITES

Ask your local government about other items that may have local markets for reuse or recycling:

- Plastic tubs and plastic bags – Some communities collect these items curbside. In others, stores may provide collection bins.



- Foam packing peanuts – These can be reused by mail service outlets.
- Rigid foam packaging – Ask your solid waste official if anyone recycles Styrofoam.
- Motor oil, filters, antifreeze, batteries, and tires – Since these are so toxic, or a nuisance, in the environment, local governments often provide for recycling.

- Books – There may be outlets for selling or donating books for reuse in your community. The binding and hard covers generally keep books from being recycled with paper, but some recyclers have the ability to accept them.
- Wood and dry wall – Ask your solid waste official if any local companies accept these.
- Cloth products – Even if they are torn or stained, thrifts sometimes accept clothing and other fabrics for rags or recycling.
- Electronics (computers, printers, cell phones, TVs, etc.) – Electronics contain toxic metals and shouldn't be landfilled or incinerated. Check with your local solid waste official about reuse/recycling opportunities.
- Fluorescent bulbs – These bulbs contain mercury and should be stored for recycling.

### **STEP THREE – COMPOSTING**

Once you are comfortable with recycling, it's time to make another dramatic reduction in waste through composting. A compost pile will keep all your grass clippings, fallen leaves, and garden debris out of the garbage and turn them into a soil amendment. You can also add wood ashes and drier or vacuum-cleaner fluff. Even if you give it no attention, a pile of organic debris will eventually degrade because of the action of bacteria, fungi, and other organisms. If you want the compost sooner, the trick is to grow more bacteria to do the work for you. Bacteria need a certain mix of carbon and nitrogen, water, air, and lots of surface area to thrive (a shredded leaf or twig has more surface area than a whole one). Turning the pile helps provide air. Holding bins are not required, but they are very helpful in keeping the pile organized and sightly.

Once you have successfully composted yard debris, you can add food waste like vegetable and fruit scraps, coffee grounds, and plate scrapings. To avoid pest problems, leave out meat, dairy, oil, or grain products. Just dig a hole in your compost and bury the food, covering it up with compost. Other ways of composting food scraps are a worm bin or burying in the soil. A worm bin is usually a home-made box, with holes drilled in the bottom, and a lid. It is filled with bedding such as damp shredded newspaper and a pound of red worms, which digest the food. If you are burying food in the ground, cover it with at least eight inches of soil.

### **STEP FOUR – PACKAGING AND DISPOSABLES**

Now it's time to attack the bane of American society—packaging and disposables that are not recyclable or compostable. That's where pre-cycling comes in—altering your purchasing habits to end up without waste. Seek out those grocery, meat, and hardware stores where items are not prepackaged in plastic. If you can't find the product you need without excess packaging, unwrap it at the store and leave the package there along with your explanation. Get yourself some everyday cloth napkins to replace paper ones; dish towels and rags to replace paper towels; and containers with lids to avoid using plastic wrap and foil. Patronize restaurants that use washable plates and utensils.

### **ANALYZING WHAT'S LEFT**

Now that there's so little in your trash can, you can easily see what's left and determine how it could be eliminated.