

## Beyond Recycling: China Won't Take Our Waste Anymore

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As Americans, we need to accept the challenges of reducing our waste production by avoiding excessive packaging and embracing smart recycling practices.

Recycling is one tool for waste management, but "it's complicated." Whether your community has curbside recycling or a community deposit site, it's important to keep recycling streams as "clean" as possible to keep economic value in the materials. Recycling depends on commodity markets which are local and vary considerably. Cities often accept more types of materials due to economies of scale in sorting and selling the products. Smaller communities may not generate enough of a particular material to make it worth a hauler's effort.



### *Here are some general rules:*

- **Aluminum** cans have a very high value. Aluminum is taken to foundries where it is re-melted and poured into ingots for manufacturing.
- **Tin** cans have low economic value and are often contaminated with food residue. However, they are easy to separate at a facility because they are magnetic.
- **Glass** containers are heavy and sadly low in value. Weight makes transportation costly. Unless there is a glass foundry nearby, glass is often put in landfills. It can be re-melted and is best when sorted by color.
- **Plastics** have to be carefully sorted because each resin has its own physical properties. Plastic composite lumber companies can use a variety of plastics, but transportation can be impractical. Reducing the volume of plastic waste is a growing worldwide concern.
- **Paper** is graded by cleanliness, lack of oil contamination, color and length of fiber. High-grade office paper is of highest value. Dirty and mixed paper is of lower value.

A quick rinse to clean containers is effective in removing food residue and keeping value high. Keep the stream "clean" by sorting containers with only one type of material. Remove plastic tops from paper cartons, metal tops from glass containers or aluminum seals from plastic containers.

Plastic bags and other types of plastic film should never go into a curbside recycling bin because they get tangled in the gears of the sorting machines. They do have some value and should be bagged together and deposited at a collection bin at most grocery stores.

Batteries, electronics, light bulbs, phones, electric cords and appliances can also be recycled. Sites vary by community. A good source of information on the ever-changing world of recycling is [wm.com/thinkgreen/what-can-i-recycle.jsp](http://wm.com/thinkgreen/what-can-i-recycle.jsp).

Buy only what you need and choose products with long lifetimes. Think about products and containers you buy. Can you choose beer in cans? Can you buy grains and nuts in the bulk food section? Can you carry your reusable water bottle? Can you purchase products with recycled content? Try to dig deeper and learn the specifics of how and where your community recycles. ❁

*This article is abridged from a report by Catherine Nicholson, Garden Club of America.*