

## **Hey you! Your bad recycling is costing all of us money!**

People around Greater Boston are dumping trash in their recycling bins, and it's wrecking city budgets.

**By Amy Sutherland**, Updated March 27, 2020, 12:54 p.m

More than a decade into single-stream recycling — putting all our recyclables together in one bin — we've turned into recycling slobs. In my Boston neighborhood, I've seen blue recycling bins stuffed with broken Christmas lights, old Swiffers, suitcases, even panini grills. That's nothing compared with Claire Galkowski, executive director of the South Shore Recycling Cooperative in Westwood. "I've seen lawn chairs, frying pans, and dirty diapers in people's bins," she says. "I pulled a potted plant out of a neighbor's bin recently."

Single-stream recycling is made possible by machines that sort our junk. When we dump the wrong things in our bins, our mistakes gum up, even break, those machines. That pushes the cost of recycling up. And when a bale of used paper winds up stuck together with grape jam and riddled with plastic shopping bags, well, the whole load is getting redirected straight to a landfill.

About a quarter of what Americans put in recycling bins either doesn't belong there in the first place, or is too dirty to be recycled, according to the National

Waste & Recycling Association. China used to take that sorry mess off our hands anyway, but in 2018 it said no more, followed by India and Indonesia. Since then, recycling has taken a bigger and bigger bite out of city budgets. Where recycling used to pay for itself, and even earned some municipalities pocket money, now it costs major dollars. The city of Boston, which in 2017 paid \$200,000 for recycling, expects to shell out \$5 million this year. And we'll be paying even more in fees if we keep throwing trash in our recycling bins.

To be fair, the simplicity of single stream gave us the idea that anything with a smidge of plastic, paper, glass, or metal belongs in the bin. But recycling is more complicated than that. Take the simple pizza box. You can put it in a bin, but only if you clean it (no cheese dribbles and half-eaten slices inside) and rip off any extra greasy sections.

Adding to the confusion is the oddly cheerful triangular recyclable logo. You should ignore the triangles with just numbers in them, says Michael Orr, Cambridge's recycling director. You read that right. That logo means something is recyclable in general — not that it can go in your blue bin. Municipal recycling programs are designed to take only certain items. Many cities have handy online recycling guides, and others are adding them. But it's

up to us to read them. In the meantime, here's a rundown of the five most common items area recycling program directors say to keep out of our bins.

## **Plastic bags**

They may be cheap and practical, but plastic bags are public enemy number one for municipal recycling systems, which is why New York state just banned them. They catch on rotors and regularly jam the mechanical sorters. Then a worker must cut the knot out by hand, which is dangerous and costly.

But, you cry, plastic shopping bags sport that triangular logo! They do, and they can be recycled, but only at stores that accept "film" plastics (including dry-cleaning bags, plastic bread bags, and Amazon bubble wrap packages), such as Target and some grocery store chains. "There's a home for plastic bags," says Gerard Gorman, Boston's recycling coordinator. "Just not in your bin." In short, the only plastic in your recycling should be containers.

## **Textiles**

Clothing, shoes, sheets, or towels can be reused but not recycled curbside. Last year's running shoes will jam the sorting at the processing plant, which jacks up costs. Plus, your castoffs will get banished to a landfill, Orr says. Since

garments made of acrylic or polyester take decades, if not centuries, to break down, best to take your discards to a resale shop or a clothing collection bin.

## **Dregs**

All the ketchup, salad dressing, mayonnaise, laundry detergent, or cat food you left in the bottom of their respective containers will fly out when it hits a sorter's rotors, splattering the nearby recyclables. That'll turn a bale of paper into The Blob. Plus, food gets moldy and can make paper moldy, especially when sitting around in the heat. "That is why recycling plants often stink," Galkowski says. So rinse out your containers, and, if you want a gold star, peel off the labels. Orr says it's best to put the lids back on the containers and don't crush cans or plastic bottles — it makes items harder to sort.

## **Tanglers**

Anything bendy and long is likely to choke the sorting machines. Wire hangers are the worst offenders, but people dump extension cords, computer cables, garden hoses, and strings of Christmas lights into their recycling. Stop it!

Stores such as Best Buy will take old computer cables as well as a long list of electronics, and some dry cleaners will reuse metal hangers. But no one wants your leaky garden hose — trash it.

## **Mixed materials**

Single-stream processes cannot abide items made of two or more materials. Those foam-lined cardboard boxes and paper mailing envelopes with bubble wrap are strictly verboten (plastic foam can't be recycled curbside in Massachusetts at all). Recycling processors do not have the equipment to separate the plastic foam from the cardboard, nor the bubble wrap from the paper. The paper cartons that hold milk, juice, and broth can be lined with wax, plastic, or aluminum, and to-go coffee cups are lined with plastic. Next to no municipal recycling programs in Greater Boston accept them. Chuck them.

To recycle right, you have to know when to throw something in the trash. If we clean up our acts, we can rescue our recycling programs and help our community's budget and, ultimately, the planet.

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