
In the Bin

FAQs: What goes in the recycling bin?

Recycling has been mandatory in New Jersey since 1987 but questions continually arise about recycling. The Union County Bureau of Recycling wants residents to recycle right so here are answers to some of the most commonly asked questions.



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Helping You Recycle Right

Q: What can I recycle in my curbside bin?

A: Recycle all empty plastic bottles coded #1 & # 2, aluminum & steel (tin) cans, glass bottles and jars, paper, newspaper, magazines & junk mail as well as cartons, cardboard and chipboard.

Q: How are the comingled recyclables collected curbside separated for recycling?

A: A combination of machines and employees sort all of the materials collected for recycling into metal, plastic, paper and cardboard. Plastic bags jam up the machines so please keep them out of your recycling container.

Q: What is NOT ACCEPTABLE in my recycling bin?

A: In addition to plastic bags and Styrofoam, recycling bins should be free of food waste, no takeout food containers, no dishware, glass, or mirrors, no tubs (yogurt or margarine), no paper towels, hangers, cups or plates, flower pots, video tapes, pots & pans, bulbs, batteries, hoses, shredded paper and no syringes.

Q: If an item is not on my acceptable items list, and I think it could be recycled, what should I do with it?

A: No. Putting the wrong recyclables into your bin or cart will contaminate the recycling stream. The materials move quickly on the belts through the Material Recovery Facility (MRF). Machines and people cannot quickly sort all of the unacceptable items, which can create contamination and the recovered items cannot be sold. It's best to follow the list of acceptable items. It's important to recycle, but it's just as important to recycle correctly.

Q: Why can't plastic bags go in the curbside recycling bin?

A: Plastic grocery bags are not compatible with the machines that sort recyclables at the processing facility. However, many grocery and retail stores will collect plastic bags at their entrance for recycling. Visit <https://www.plasticfilmrecycling.org/> for a location near you.

Q: What types of plastics can I recycle curbside? Why are some plastics, like tubs, trays, and hinged (clamshell) containers not accepted?

A: The only plastics acceptable in curbside recycling are bottles and jugs coded with #1 or #2 on the bottom (milk jugs, orange juice bottles, water/soda bottles, shampoo bottles, etc.). Other plastic containers (yogurt cups, strawberry/lettuce containers, sour cream tubs, etc.) are a different type of plastic that is not able to be recycled locally.

Q: Should I leave the lids on or off my plastic bottles?

A: Take the lids off and throw them away. This helps ensure that bottles are empty of all liquids.

Q: What about Styrofoam; it displays the #6 with the recycling symbol?

A: Styrofoam CANNOT be added to your curbside recycling. However, Union County is starting a pilot recycling program for Styrofoam in 2018 so stay tuned for drop off locations. The county is also home to Foam Pack Industries, a manufacturer of Styrofoam products, who will accept clean, dry Styrofoam for recycling (no peanuts); please visit their website for detailed information. <http://www.foampackindustries.com/eps-recycling-reselling-of-densified-eps.html> .

Q: What about my pizza box?

A: Pizza boxes are recyclable, food is not. Remove all the food and greasy spots and recycle the rest. If the bottom of the box is covered in grease and cheese you can tear off the top of the box and recycle it.

Q: How clean does a container need to be before recycling it?

A: Containers should be rinsed and empty. They do not need to be thoroughly washed. Sticky items such as peanut butter jars just need to be wiped out to be “clean enough”. Cardboard boxes should be free of any and all packing material.

Q: Can egg cartons be recycled?

A: There are three different types of egg cartons: Plastic, Styrofoam and Paperboard. All are unacceptable in the recycling bin but the paperboard containers are great in a compost pile.

Q: Can box cartons such as juice and dairy be recycled?

A: YES! Cartons are now accepted curbside for recycling. Make sure cartons are empty before recycling. No juice pouches at this time.

Q: What is contamination and why is it bad for recycling?

A: Any material that is not recyclable that residents put in their recycling bin. This could include yogurt cups, aluminum foil and plastic bags. Removing contamination is costly for the processors thereby increasing the cost of recycling. Some contamination can even damage the equipment at the materials recovery facility and require the whole plant to be shut down while plastic bags and video tapes are cut off equipment.

Q: How can I properly dispose of latex paint?

A: Latex paint is not hazardous and can be thrown away once dry. Garbage collectors cannot pick up liquids so remove the lid and let dry. To speed up this process, add kitty litter or paint hardener. Once dry, set out with your regular trash. Visit www.ucnj.org/recycling for more information.