



With countless products passing through our homes each year, it isn't always easy to determine their proper disposal. Trying to find out if a material should be trashed, recycled, or composted is often confusing, but luckily, there is a sure way to solve the issue.

To get started, check out this trusty, thorough guide for when to trash, recycle, or compost nearly any item in your home. Creating a consistent and confusion-free system not only streamlines your day-to-day activities, but it also reduces your overall carbon footprint. It's all about a mindset—figure out the basic rules behind each option, and you'll be good to go.

Overview

When it comes to composting, ask yourself a simple question: is this a food product my grandparents would recognize? Most basic food items can be broken down to their simplest forms through the process of composting. [Compost at home](#) or send your compostable food to a nearby center. Please note that wastes—including animal wastes—are not covered in this category.

Recyclable materials will usually include a marker to indicate where they belong. Most metals, plastics, and paper products are often recyclable via curbside pickup. Check out the original packaging or container for markers and numbers indicating their makeup. The correct bin depends on your town's and recycling center's requirements. Be sure to rinse any packaging or food containers before placing them in a recycling bin.

Your last resort is sending the item to the trash. This is reserved for items that cannot be reused, recycled, or turned back into nutrient-rich soil.

When to Compost



As mentioned above, most basic food items can be composted. The primary requirement for a compostable material is that it consists of [organic compounds which can be broken down](#) into nutrient-rich soil. Most unprocessed foods (excluding cooked dairy and meat) can be sent to composting centers or composted at home to slowly break down into a reusable soil for fertilizing gardens and crops. This continuous cycle of natural waste is the most eco-friendly option for food disposal.

Check out this [handy infographic](#), or a peruse a more thorough rundown of composting [here](#).

What can you compost?

(List courtesy of [Sunset Scavenger](#))

Food Scraps

- Bread, grains, and pasta
- Coffee grounds with paper filter
- Dairy
- Eggs (and eggshells)
- Fruit
- Leftovers and spoiled foods
- Meat
- Seafood
- Tea and tea bags
- Vegetables

Food-soiled paper

- Coffee filters
- Greasy pizza boxes
- Paper cups and plates
- Paper ice cream containers
- Paper bags, napkins, tissues, and towels
- Paper take-out boxes and containers
- Tissues
- Waxy paper milk and juice cartons

Plants

- Branches and brush
- Flowers
- Grasses and weeds
- Leaves
- Tree trimmings

Other

- Cotton balls and cotton swabs
- Hair, fur, and feathers
- Plastic and cutlery clearly labeled "compostable"
- Vegetable wood crates
- Waxed cardboard and paper
- Clean wood
- Wooden chopsticks

Items you cannot compost:

- Aluminum foil or trays
- "Biodegradable" plastic
- Cat litter or animal feces
- Ceramic dishware or glassware
- Clothing, linens, and rags
- Cooking oil
- Corks (natural or plastic)
- Diapers
- Dirt, rocks, or stone
- Flower pots or trays
- Foil-backed or plastic-backed paper
- Glass, metal, or plastic not labeled "compostable"
- Juice- or soy milk-type boxes with foil liner
- Liquids
- Plastic bags, wrappers, or film
- Recyclable/clean cardboard or paper
- Styrofoam
- Wood—plywood, pressboard, painted, or stained wood

When to Recycle



Your first line of defense against over-producing waste in your home is considering an item's reusability. Many commonly collected items, such as plastic shopping bags and glass containers, can be transformed into both practical and decorative options for the home, saving both money and environmental impact.

If the item is not directly reusable in your home, [chances are it can be broken down and reused](#) in a more diverse manner via local recycling centers or mail-in programs. These recycling resources give extensive life spans to the hearty materials that we use in our daily lives.

In most cities, the following common materials are recyclable:

- Metal
- Aluminum cans
- Aluminum foil and trays (ball foil up to softball size)
- Caps and lids from bottles, jars, and steel (tin) cans
- Paint cans (must be empty or dry)
- Spray cans (must be empty)
- Steel (tin) cans

Be sure to remove all food and liquid residue from containers before placing them in the bin.

What can you recycle?

(List courtesy of [Sunset Scavenger](#))

Plastic (except those labeled "compostable")

- Bottles
- Buckets
- CDs, DVDs, CD-ROMs, and cases (remove paper insert)
- Coffee cup lids
- Containers and clamshells
- Corks—plastic
- Cups and plates (plastic only, no styrofoam)
- Flower pots and trays—plastic
- Laundry detergent bottles
- Molded plastic packaging

Paper (clean, dry, and unsoiled)

- Bags (paper only, no plastic)
- Cardboard (non-waxed)
- Cereal boxes and paperboard (remove plastic liner)
- Computer and office paper
- Egg cartons
- Envelopes (windows okay)
- Junk mail and magazines
- Newspapers
- Packing or kraft paper
- Phonebooks
- Sticky notes
- Shredded paper (place in sealed paper bag, and label "shredded paper")
- Wrapping paper (non-metallic)

Glass (no liquids or food)

- Glass bottles and jars only (metal caps and lids too)

Items you cannot recycle:

- Batteries
- Ceramic dishware or glassware
- Clothing, linens, and rags
- Coat hangers
- Electronics
- Foil-backed or plastic-backed paper
- Food scraps
- Glass mirrors and windows
- Juice- or soy milk-type boxes with foil liner
- Incandescent light bulbs
- Fluorescent light bulbs and HIDs
- Plastic bags, wrappers, or film
- Plastic items mixed with metal, fabric, or rubber
- Plastic labeled "compostable" or "biodegradable"
- Scrap metal

- Soiled paper—paper cups, plates, napkins, tissues, towels, take-out boxes, and greasy pizza boxes
- Styrofoam
- Waxed cardboard and paper
- Waxy paper milk or juice cartons
- Wood
- Yard trimmings

When to Trash



If the item cannot be composted or recycled, then it is [fine to toss it in the trash](#). However, with particular attention to an item’s repurposing and recycling options, you may find that very little ends up in your trash can. Quite often, sending out compostable items and separating clean, recyclable containers also keeps smelly items out of your bin, extending the life of each trash can liner. This both saves money and contributes to your shrinking carbon footprint.

What can you trash (in most cities)?

(List courtesy of [Sunset Scavenger](#))

- Cat litter and animal feces (bagged)
- Ceramic dishware or glassware
- Clothing linens and rags
- Cigarette butts (extinguished—run under water prior to disposal)
- Dental floss
- Diapers

- Feminine hygiene products
- Foil-backed or plastic-backed paper
- Glass mirrors and windows
- Incandescent light bulbs (no fluorescents or HIDs)
- Juice- or soy milk-type boxes with foil liner
- Mylar (shiny metal) bags—potato chips, candy bars, balloons, etc.
- Pens and pencils
- Plastic bags, wrappers, and film not labeled "compostable"
- Plastic items mixed with metal, fabric, or rubber
- Plastic labeled "biodegradable" only
- Rubber bands
- Six-pack ring holder (please cut up)
- Sponges
- Styrofoam
- Twist ties
- Wood—small pieces of plywood, pressboard, and painted or stained wood

Items that should not be trashed:

- Appliances
- Asbestos
- Batteries
- Coat hangers
- Construction debris
- Cooking oil and grease
- Dirt, rocks, or stone
- Electronics
- Fluorescent or HID light bulbs
- Food scraps, soiled paper, or yard trimmings
- Household hazardous waste or chemicals
- Large items—furniture, metal, plastic, wood
- Liquids or ice
- Motor oil (most cities allow you to leave out separately in an appropriately marked plastic container)
- Needles or syringes
- Paint
- Plastic labeled "compostable"
- Recyclable cardboard, glass, metal, paper, or plastic
- Toys with electronics or batteries
- Waxed cardboard and paper
- Waxy paper milk or juice cartons

Special Cases



Although large items can often be tossed in the trash or left on the curb for bulk pickup, it's important to keep the hard work of our garbage collectors in mind, as well as the health of the landfill. Before throwing away the following items, consider seeking out a particular waste method after a bit of online research.

Special items to watch out for

(Guidelines courtesy of [King County](#))

- Batteries—Look for household hazardous waste collection sites and some automotive shops.
 - Many types of batteries do not go in the garbage; they can be recycled at county transfer stations or at local businesses.
 - Alkaline batteries—Household hazardous waste collection facilities and many businesses take them.
 - “Button” batteries—Coin-shaped batteries (hearing aids, watches, and other electronics) are taken at household hazardous waste collection sites.
 - Motor vehicle batteries
 - Rechargeable batteries
 - Computer backup batteries
- Electronics—DO NOT toss these items in the trash, especially older items. Check for local e-recycling locations:
 - Computers
 - Mainframes, desktops, and laptops
 - Computer monitors
 - Cathode ray tubes and flat-panel LCDs

- TVs
- Cell phones
- Large appliances—Appliances can be repaired or donated for reuse. Older appliances may contain chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which qualified personnel must remove before disposal.
 - Refrigerators and freezers
 - Dishwashers, clothes washers and dryers
 - Stoves, ranges, and furnaces
 - Mattresses
- Mercury-Containing Products—These products must be properly disposed of since they tend to contaminate the ground:
 - Fluorescent bulbs and tubes, including “green tipped” or “low mercury” tubes and compact fluorescent (CFLs) bulbs and tubes (Find out where to recycle fluorescent bulbs.)
 - Mercury switches, thermometers, and thermostats

Trash Smarter

When a significant lifestyle change seems daunting, starting with small steps is the best way to make a long-term difference. These slight alterations not only keep your home fresh and clean but also impact the world as a whole.

In general, remember these three rules: unmodified foods can be turned into rich, reusable soil; common, cleanable materials can be sent away to be transformed into new products; and most other materials can be sent to the trash after a bit of research. These considerations will improve your home, lifestyle, and the overall health of the world around us.



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