ARE YOU RECYCLING RIGHT?

Tri-County Recycling explains how

BY GRACE E. OLSON
682.5 gallons of oil, 7,000 gallons of water and 3.3 cubic yards of landfill space.

According to "Waste Reduction is a Smart Business Decision," these are the figures recycling one ton of paper saves. 2.5 million is the number of plastic bottles Americans throw away every hour. And 500 years is how long it takes for them to break down.

Today it’s easier than ever to see the benefits of recycling. And it’s also never been more straightforward to get into the habit of including it in your daily routine. The option to do so is virtually everywhere, and the physical act has been simplified since the practice first came on the scene.

The evolution to a single-stream system in northeast Wisconsin has helped recycling programs achieve remarkable success and a new standard of ease. One can simply toss all their recyclables — paper, metal, plastic, glass, etc. — in one bin.

However, there are important guidelines.

It’s Tri-County Recycling’s job to make sure they’re followed — for the safety of their employees and the well-being of our communities and the earth. Brown, Outagamie and Winnebago Counties joined forces in 2009 to build the state-of-the-art Tri-County Recycling facility to better serve the region’s recycling programs. The combination has allowed a huge increase in capacity to accept and sort through recyclable material, and the joint effort allows for continuous improvements. With the single-stream process in place, you may think you know all there is to know.
“One misconception that people have is they think they can recycle anything that’s plastic,” Christine Miller, Recycling Coordinator for Outagamie County Recycling, says. “Because it’s plastic they think they should always throw it in the recycling bin and that is not the case.

“People want to recycle as much as they can, but only certain types of plastic can be recycled in your curbside bin,” Mark Walter, Business Development Manager for Brown County Port & Resource Recovery, explains. “Plastic bags, plastic toys, coolers, lawn furniture and kids’ play furniture are not accepted.”

“Typically, the plastics we can recycle are food and beverage containers or household items like detergent jugs, and shampoo bottles — plastic containers that are often found in your kitchen, laundry room or bathroom,” Kathy Hutter, Recycling Program Manager for Winnebago County, adds.

When nonrecyclable material is mixed in with acceptable items, it can cause major problems to the facility’s well-oiled machines — literally!

Plastic bags, film and wraps clog the sorting screens, cause maintenance issues and prevent proper sorting from happening. Thus, Tri-County Recycling sorting staff must spend time cutting film and debris from the screens (see image to the left), which is dangerous and labor intensive. And once the plastic film and bags are removed, they are too dirty to then be recycled.

That doesn’t mean you should cross plastic bags off your list:

RIGHT:
METAL:
- Aluminum, steel, tin, bottles and cans

GLASS:
- Food and beverage bottles and jars (all colors)

PLASTIC:
- All household plastic bottles, cups and containers:
- Dairy containers and lids
- Produce, bakery and deli containers
- Soda, water and other drink bottles
- Food and household bottles, jars and jugs

PAPER:
- Cartons (milk, juice, soup, wine, etc.)
- Newspapers, magazines, junk mail and catalogs
- Cardboard and paperboard
- Office, writing and school paper
- Phonebooks, softcover and hardcover books
- Shredded paper (place in a paper bag and staple shut)

WRONG:
PLASTIC BAGS
NEEDLES/SHARPS
CLOTHING/TANGLERS

As already mentioned, plastic bags, ropes and hoses cause big problems with the sorting equipment as it gets tangled in the equipment. Nonacceptable material also ends up in the landfill. Both issues cost money to fix, which means that the recycling process becomes more expensive for your local community.”

—MARK WALTER, Business Development Manager for Brown County Port & Resource Recovery
It’s that time of year! The holidays are fast approaching, and that means an abundance of parties, gift exchanges and messes. What should you do with the aftermath? Christine explains that gift wrap and tissue paper are not accepted in our local recycling program, and points out why such items wreak havoc on the system:

- Many gift wraps are made from aluminum foil and film plastic. These wraps are usually very shiny and durable, but are not easily distinguishable from paper wrapping.
- During gift opening, people often throw ribbons, bows, garbage and tissue paper all together inside a large plastic bag. All items mentioned, including the plastic bag, cause problems for the recycling sorting facility and the paper mills that accept the material.
- Tissue paper is not recyclable because the fibers in tissue paper are long and weak. Strong and short fibers are necessary in order to recycle paper.

Along with unwanted plastic, the Tri-County Recycling facility experiences contamination issues that have the potential to cause damage to sorting equipment or are a health risk to sanitation workers. But they’re completely preventable with a little cooperation.

“It’s a matter of resisting the temptation of putting everything in the curbside bin hoping we can recycle it,” Kathy says. “We’ve made recycling so convenient, we really need people to be conscientious about what they’re putting in their recycling bin and understanding that there are items that cause issues for our sorters and how the facility runs.”

Clothing, bedding, rope/twine and hoses encompass what are known as “tanglers,” a major contaminant of recycling. They pose the same problem as plastic bags, and clog and wrap around the sorting screens (see photo above). As an alternative to sending them off to the recycling facility, these items should be donated or thrown in the trash.

Even more dangerous, the top contamination items are known as “sharps” — needles, syringes and lancets — and have the potential to cause serious health issues.

“If a container full of sharps comes in and bursts open, anyone on the line is exposed to whatever is in that container, which could be infectious diseases,” Kathy explains. “Accidental needle sticks to sorting staff, loss of production, shutting down the facility, disposal expenses and medical expenses to treat affected staff are all possible repercussions of placing sharps in your recycling bin.”

Instead, Tri-County Recycling urges people to dispose of needles, syringes and lancets in designated sharps containers at local drop-off locations.

“The safety of our staff is the most important thing,” Christine says. “We’re working on getting more sharps collection sites within our area.”

GIFT WRAP: THE NIGHTMARE AFTER THE HOLIDAYS?

Tri-County Recycling urges you to be mindful this holiday season by inspecting and separating 100 percent paper wrapping from all the ribbons, bows, garbage, tissue paper and plastic bags. If you take these steps, you are welcome to recycle your gift wrap!