

Celebrate Earth Day: Dispose of Problem Trash

Each year we produce an increased amount of solid waste, some of which is poisonous, dangerous, or creates bulky disposal problems. In honor of Earth Day and in acknowledgement of our garbage dilemma, Tuolumne County Master Gardeners—along with Cal Sierra Disposal/Waste Management, Tuolumne County Solid Waste, and Timbron International—are offering you multiple ways to dispose of your problem trash.

Why not create your own Earth Day celebration and household clean-up day? Get rid of your unused household chemicals and that bulky, what-do-I-do-with-this Styrofoam all at the same time.

Styrofoam is a disposal headache. If you've ever tried stuffing the polystyrene packing from your latest electronic purchase into a garbage can, you've experienced the problem. Extremely bulky, yet lightweight, it takes up lots of space in the waste stream (and in landfills), but its removal doesn't add much value to what is known as "diversion numbers."

In 1989, California Assembly Bill 939, known as the Integrated Waste Management Act, was passed because of the increase in waste stream and the decrease in landfill capacity. AB 939 established a hierarchy of approaches to our waste stream generation; source reduction, recycling and composting, and environmentally safe transformation and disposal. It also mandated a reduction (or diversion) of waste being disposed: jurisdictions were required to meet diversion goals of 25% by 1995 and 50% by the year 2000.

However, the 25% and 50% goals are based on weight. So, for example, "green waste"—lawn and garden clippings and prunings, heavy from a high water content—is targeted for removal from the waste collection system. Styrofoam is ignored because its removal doesn't add much to the 50%-by-weight waste stream diversion goal.

Timbron International, a manufacturing plant in Stockton, is eager to acquire all the polystyrene they can. They are committed to helping recycle polystyrene locally to be used to make extruded moldings for the construction industry. Their products are available for purchase at local home centers, and are both recycled and recyclable.

In addition to recycling polystyrene, here are some other suggestions for ways to commemorate Earth Day:

Plant a tree. You'll help reduce carbon dioxide—a greenhouse gas—in the atmosphere (carbon sequestration) and celebrate Earth Day and Arbor Day, all at the same time.

Create a compost pile. Recycle those yard and garden clippings and prunings into "Gardener's Gold" on-site. Keep your green waste out of the waste stream. Turn the compost pile you already have. Help nature's decomposition process along.

Replace a light bulb. Exchange an incandescent bulb for a long-lived fluorescent one. You'll help reduce energy use in your home, thus requiring less energy generation from the burning of fossil fuels and other sources.

Remove an invasive plant. Pull some ivy; remove your vinca, or tear out a broom plant (maybe even one that you planted in error). Plant a California native in its place. Hand pull a patch of yellow star thistle.

Don't drive. Set aside one day to only walk or ride your bike (non-motorized transportation). Stay home and burn less fuel in honor of Earth Day.

Bring your own bag. We've all seen the plastic bags from local retailers blowing alongside highways or stuck in trees and shrubs. Carry your groceries in a reusable tote.

Use your own mug. To begin and end this column with polystyrene foam, when you buy coffee, have them fill your mug from home. According to the www.earthday.net website, each year Americans throw away 25,000,000,000 (that's 25 BILLION) Styrofoam cups. 500 years from now that Styrofoam cup you used will still be sitting in a landfill.

Let's keep this material out of the landfill.

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