

## **Plastics Recycling Is A Team Effort** **by Vera Strader**

Everybody's doing it—recycling that is. According to Consumer Reports, two-thirds of us say we recycle plastics, a good sign since carelessly discarded plastics pollute our landscapes and dirty our oceans.

Plastic takes centuries to degrade in our oceans and to breakdown in overflowing landfills, but one ton of recycled plastic can save 30 cubic yards of landfill space and an equivalent of 16.3 barrels of oil (<http://sanjoaquinvalley.wm.com/recyclingfacts.asp>). Using recycled plastic products also reduces greenhouse gas emissions as compared with products made from new materials.

Effective recycling requires more than simply tossing plastics into the collection barrel. Plastics are complex with many different types that cannot all be melted down and recycled together. The chasing arrows icon found on many containers denotes the type of plastic a container is made from.

Among the most recyclable types are numbers 1 and 2, found in many milk jugs and bottles with an opening or neck that's smaller than the base. These are the plastics presently accepted by Cal Sierra, A Waste Management Company, operating the transfer station for Tuolumne County's Solid Waste Division.

Plastics must be carefully sorted before processing. Contamination including incompatible plastics, food, and dirt compromises future use as new, recycled materials. Even within a plastic type, different additives—resins, molding agents, and dyes—create varying melting points and different responses to additives used during their subsequent reprocessing. Sorting plastics is usually achieved at least in part manually, a painstaking process.

After bottles are collected, they are taken to a recovery facility where they are compressed into large bales. These bales are shipped to a plastics reclaimer where the bales are ripped apart and the plastics are further sorted by resin and perhaps color. The pieces are then shredded into tiny flakes, washed, dried, and melted. The melted plastics are extruded into pellets to be sold to manufacturers of various plastic products.

Some plastics are spun into fine thread-like material used to make fleece pullovers; filling for jackets, quilts and sleeping bags; and even carpets. Other plastics are melted and extruded into plastic pipe, crates, lunch trays, park benches, lumber including deck flooring, artificial turf, or any of countless other products.

### **HOW TO RECYCLE PLASTICS:**

- Check the chasing arrows icon to determine that your plastics are a type recycled by your waste management department. **Do not include plastics that are not included in your program.**

- Remove and discard caps and any pumps since they are made of different materials than bottles.
- Rinse; no need to remove labels.
- Crush to minimize space in the recycling bin.
- When away from home, either bring home your plastics for recycling or place in marked recycling receptacles.
- If you don't have curbside recycling, take your recyclables to your closest recycling center. Separate California Refund Value plastics (check your bottles for the CRV designation) for a rebate of a nickel each for containers less than 24 ounces and a ten cents for those 24 ounces and larger.
- Buy products marked "made with recycled content" or "made with post-consumer recycled content."

Increased recycling is not the only answer to our plastic-contaminated environment and overloaded landfills. If we consumers end up using more plastics because we believe they are recyclable, then our total use may actually rise. To further complicate the picture, most secondary products are not recyclable and, once their lifetime is completed, eventually end up in landfills or as litter.

Solutions to this dilemma include buying in refillable containers or in bulk, purchasing items that don't need much packaging, reusing plastics whenever possible, and buying products in recyclable and recycled packages.

Reduce, reuse, and recycle remains a principle to live by (pun intended)!

*Vera Strader strives to live more sustainably by recycling and reusing household materials and by composting kitchen and yard waste.*