

Frequently Asked Questions about Mixed Recycling

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General

Q. Who do these guidelines apply to?

A. Monroe County's Mixed Recycling guidelines apply to customers of the Monroe County Recycling Center (MCRC), including Waste Management and the City of Rochester. The MCRC is a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) that sorts, processes, and markets recyclable commodities for sale to end-users and manufacturers. Waste and recycling collection companies have a choice of MRFs to bring their recyclable materials to for sorting and processing, and not all companies that operate in Monroe County use the MCRC. All of Waste Management and the City of Rochester's curbside recycling materials come to the MCRC, as well as many other municipalities and private companies. About 75% of residents in Monroe County are served by the MCRC through their collection company. Customers should contact their collection company to confirm what is accepted and how recycling bins should be prepared.

Q. Why are the guidelines different from where I used to live or for different collection companies?

A. Differences exist between locations and collection company guidelines due to the MRF operators' access to markets, sorting technology, and composition of the waste stream in a given area.

Q. Why are the guidelines always changing?

A. Guidelines must evolve with market and packaging changes to maintain a sustainable recycling program. As markets develop for new types of packaging, Monroe County works with the operator of the MCRC, Waste Management, to identify opportunities to recycle more. Guidelines may change to encompass more acceptable recyclable materials due to advances in recycling sorting or processing technology (for example, the addition of reattached caps and cartons to the list of acceptable recyclables). Markets for certain recyclable commodities may also decrease based on supply and demand and changes in packaging (for example, the manufacturing industry's shift from glass to plastic containers).

Monroe County works with the operator of the MCRC to determine the list of acceptable recyclables, which is comprised of the items that can be readily collected curbside, effectively processed at the MCRC, and used to create new materials. Items not on the list of acceptable recyclables do not meet these criteria at this time.

Q. The guidelines are so confusing- why can't you make it simpler?

A. Keep it simple by recycling bottles, cans, paper and cardboard. No food, no liquids, and no bags. If you recycle these items and nothing else, you will be covering all of the basics without contaminating the recycling stream with non-acceptable items. There are so many types of products and packaging that people want to recycle and by creating comprehensive resources, we aim to answer the many questions that exist when it comes to recycling. But, it is better to recycle a few key items regularly than to contaminate the recycling stream by wish-cycling.

Q. You say all recyclables need to be empty and clean. How clean is clean?

A. Clean means no liquid, food, or product residue remaining. Containers that held liquids should be rinsed before recycling when possible. Containers that held food or other products should be rinsed and scraped so that there is no residue remaining. If you do not have access to clean a dirty recyclable, then it should be put in the trash so that it does not contaminate other clean recyclables. One bad apple can ruin the whole bunch when it comes to food and liquid contamination of recyclables.

Q. If I'm unsure if something can be recycled, can I just put it in the bin and let you sort it?

A. When in doubt, throw it out. "Wish-cycling" is the practice of including an item in the recycle bin even though you are unsure if it is acceptable because you really want it to be recycled. Not only does this add to the time and cost of processing recyclables, but it can be harmful to the equipment and employees at the recycling center. Recycling right does not just mean putting the right items in the bin, but equally as important, it means keeping the wrong items out of your recycling.

Q. It looks like my garbage company puts waste and recyclables in the same truck. Are they really recycling?

A. With Mixed Recycling, it is possible for collection companies to use the same truck to collect recyclables that they use to collect garbage, though typically not at the same time. With dual-stream recycling, where paper and containers have to be sorted and collected separately, collection companies usually have designated recycling trucks with a built-in divider that separates materials. When the MCRC transitioned to Mixed Recycling in 2014, local collection companies were able to use single compartment trucks (typically used for waste collection) to collect recyclables. For this reason, you may see the same truck that collects trash on your street return later to collect recyclables. Additionally, since 1992 collection companies have been required by New York State and Monroe County law to recycle.

Q. Why can't I recycle everything?

A. Products and packing are constantly evolving and it is not feasible to collect, process, and make every material into new products at this time. Recycling is important to natural resource conservation, but it also requires financial and environmental resources (transportation, energy etc.) Waste reduction and reuse are the [Environmental Protection Agency's most environmentally preferred methods](#) (before recycling) for sustainable materials management. Waste reduction means not generating waste and recyclables in the first place.

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Rather than asking why can't this be recycled, our first questions should be: Do I really need this item? Is there is an alternative that would make less waste? Can I bring my own reusable item instead? Is there an alternative that is minimally packaged or packaged in recyclable containers?



Plastics

Q1. What types of plastics **ARE ACCEPTED** for Mixed Recycling?

A. Plastic bottles, jugs, jars and tubs are the main types of containers accepted for recycling. Acceptable plastic containers are frequently found in kitchens and bathrooms.

Bottles: are defined with a neck or mouth smaller than the base. Drink bottles are the most common, but even squeeze bottles (like ketchup or dish soap) and pump or spray bottles (like hand soap and cleaning products) are acceptable.



Jugs: are plastic containers with a neck smaller than the base, and have handle. Milk, vinegar, laundry detergent, and windshield fluid are examples of acceptable jugs.



Jars: are wide mouth containers that typically close with a screw cap. Peanut butter, mayonnaise, and sauce are examples of acceptable plastic jars.



Tubs: are containers with a mouth the same size or larger than the base and generally have a separate snap-on lid. Dairy products such as butter, margarine, and sour cream are examples of acceptable plastic tubs. Single-serve yogurt containers are also acceptable.



Even though more and more types of packaging are now made from plastic, not everything is recyclable curbside. Size, shape, and the type of plastic all play a role in recyclability. Recycle plastics by shape, not by number. If it is a plastic bottle, jug, jar or tub then:

- Make sure it is clean, dry, and empty.
- Reattach caps, lids, and pumps.
- Put it in your recycle bin.

Q2. What types of plastics **ARE NOT ACCEPTED** for Mixed Recycling?

A. Plastics that are not a bottle, jug, jar or tub are generally not accepted for Mixed Recycling. This includes plastic bags/film/wraps, single-use plastics, pill bottles, plastic drink cups, loose caps and lids, all types of foam (commonly known by brand name Styrofoam™), plastic flower pots, CD/DVD cases, pouches, blister packaging, clamshells or to-go containers, microwavable trays, pool covers/liners, and plastic tarps.



Q3. Why aren't plastic bags recyclable?

A. Plastic bags are recyclable through store drop off programs and at the ecopark, but NOT through curbside Mixed Recycling. After bags and plastic films are returned to stores, they are sent to a processing facility specifically designed to recycle flexible plastic wrap. The MCRC has been engineered to process paper and rigid containers, not flexible films. Plastic bags wrap around the rotating gears at MRFs, requiring employees to stop equipment at least once a day to cut bags out of the equipment. This reduces the efficiency of the recycling process and increases labor and equipment costs. Also, it is extremely important that bags and wraps are clean and dry, and collecting them in curbside bins with bottles and containers generally leaves them too dirty and wet to be recycled.



Plastic bags at the MCRC

Q4. Can I bag my recyclables?

A. Empty recyclable items into your recycle bin so that they are loose, and keep plastic bags out. Bagged recyclables are a contaminant at the recycling center and will likely be disposed.

Q5. Why aren't single-use plastics recyclable?

A. Due to their small size and diversity of plastic resin types, these materials cannot be properly sorted at the recycling plant. Single-use plastics include coffee pods (K-cups™ and other brands), plastic straws, and plastic utensils. These items should always be disposed of in the trash. Use reusable items to reduce waste.

Q6. What happens if I try to recycle single-use plastics anyway?

A. Single-use plastics contaminate otherwise good recyclables. If a load of recycling contains non-recyclables – even by just a fraction – that entire load risks not being recycled. In many cases, single-use plastics are improperly sorted into the glass stream at the recycling center due to their small size. This photo shows the sorted glass at the MCRC. You can see caps, lids, straws, pill bottles, shredded paper, and a variety of small plastic pieces. The presence of these materials makes it very difficult to reuse and recycle glass.



Glass at the MCRC

Q7. Why aren't pill bottles recyclable?

A. Pill bottles should not be recycled primarily for public safety reasons. Inadvertently, pills may be left in bottles and put in recycle bins, which creates the risk of medicine falling into the wrong hands or being improperly disposed. Second, the small size of pill bottles means that they typically fall through the sorting equipment at the recycling center and contaminate the glass stream. The best option is to bring empty pill bottles to the ecopark or another [pharmaceutical drop off location](#) for energy recovery. Both prescription and over the counter medicine bottles are accepted.

Q8. Why aren't plastic cups recyclable?

A. The recycling system sorts items by shape and size and items, like cups, that get flattened during collection are improperly sorted. Plastic cups and drink lids get flattened during collection in compaction trucks and end up at the recycling center as two dimensional materials, following the path of those items in the system. Because the recycling center is designed to sort two dimensional items into the paper stream, plastic cups end up contaminating recyclable paper. Plastic drink cups, whether they are colored cups or clear plastic, are not acceptable for recycling.

Single-serve yogurt containers are accepted for curbside recycling locally. They are typically rigid enough to maintain their three dimensional shape and be sorted correctly. As long as they are rinsed and clean, you can include them in your recycling.



Plastic drink cups **ARE NOT** accepted for Mixed Recycling or at the ecopark.



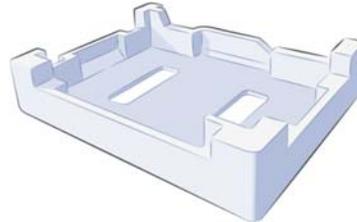
Single-serve yogurt containers **ARE ACCEPTED** for Mixed Recycling and at the ecopark.

Q9. My egg carton has the recycling symbol on it- why can't I recycle it?

A. Foam (commonly known by trade name Styrofoam™) cannot be placed in recycling bins. Check with local farmers' market vendors to see if they can reuse foam egg cartons or contact the manufacturer to inquire about mail back recycling programs. Foam meat trays, coffee cups, takeout containers or other post-consumer items have no local recycling option and should be placed in your trash. The ecopark will accept clean, white, block packing foam only and does not accept any food related foam or packing peanuts.



Egg cartons **ARE NOT ACCEPTED** for Mixed Recycling or at the ecopark.



Clean, white, block packing foam **IS ACCEPTED** at the ecopark but **IS NOT ACCEPTED** for Mixed Recycling.

Q10. Didn't you say that any plastic marked with a #1-#7 is acceptable?

A. In 2011 Monroe County rolled out a program to accept plastics numbered one through seven at the MCRC. At this time, recycling markets and collection methods were very different than they are today. In 2011, there were a number of exceptions to this rule (items that are marked with a #1-#7, but not acceptable at the MCRC) including pill bottles, plastic bags, and foam. These three items are some of the top contaminants at the MCRC today.

As new plastic packaging and products are created that cannot be effectively captured at the recycling center, the list of exceptions grows. Furthermore, the recycle symbol with a number in the center, called a Resin Identification Code, was created by the plastics industry for plastic manufacturers and was never intended to indicate recyclability to consumers. Shape is a better guideline for plastics recycling. Recycle plastic bottles, jugs, jars and tubs. If the item is not one of those shapes, it is best to leave it out of your recycle bin.

Q11. What about caps?

A. Caps and lids are recyclable if they are reattached to containers. Loose caps fall through the sorting equipment at the recycling center due to their small size.

Q12. Can plastics that are not accepted curbside be brought to the ecopark for recycling?

A. The ecopark accepts the same type of plastics in the commingled recycling bin as the Mixed Recycling curbside program, as all materials end up at the same facility for sorting, the MCRC. Therefore, the ecopark does not accept cups or the single-use plastics described earlier for recycling.

The ecopark is able to accept three types of plastics that are typically not accepted for curbside recycling because they are source separated, that is collected separately in their own bins and sent directly for processing, bypassing sorting at the MCRC. These materials are: bulky plastics, film plastics, and empty pill bottles. [Bulky plastics](#) are rigid, large, 100% plastic materials including car seats (stripped of fabric and metal), storage crates, lawn furniture, and toys (no electronic or battery components). [Film plastics](#) include plastic bags, bubble wrap, shipping envelopes, bread bags, etc. that are also acceptable at stores for recycling. [Empty pill bottles](#) include prescription and over the counter medicine bottles.

Q13. Why don't you improve the recycling equipment to capture small plastics or plastics that get compacted?

A. Nearly 80% of the material processed at our recycling center is paper so the first part of the sorting stream is designed to effectively sort paper. Just 4% of the material processed at the MCRC is plastic. At this time, the costs outweigh the benefits of investing in new equipment to sort this small portion of the recycling stream.

Paper & Cardboard

Q1. Can I recycle a pizza box?

A. Clean pizza boxes can be recycled. First, remove any wax paper lining and dispose in trash. If the bottom of the box is covered in grease and food residue, tear it off and dispose of that portion in the trash (or compost where accepted) and only recycle the clean lid.

Q2. What types of cartons can be recycled?

A. Food and beverage cartons and drink boxes such as milk, juice, soup broth, water, and wine (refrigerated and shelf-stable items) can all be recycled. Make sure to empty cartons and reattach caps before recycling.



Q3. Why can't I recycle paper towels, napkins, or tissues?

A. First, these items are usually wet or dirty, which makes them trash since recyclables need to be clean and dry. Second, these products are already made from recycled paper. Each time paper is recycled, the fibers become shorter and shorter, until they cannot be recycled again. Paper towels and napkins can often be composted. Choose reusable dish towels and napkins to reduce waste.

Q4. Why can't I recycle a fountain drink cup or to-go coffee cup?

A. Paper cups are typically lined with a thin layer of plastic to make them waterproof and able to handle hot and cold temperatures. This multi-layer mixed material cannot be effectively separated by recycling processors. The best option is to avoid single-use cups and bring a reusable mug to reduce waste.

Drink cup lids are also not accepted for Mixed Recycling. Loose caps and lids are too small and flat to be effectively sorted at the recycling center and must be reattached to their container to be recycled. Since cups are not recyclable, their lids cannot be recycled either.



Q5. Are the plastic windows on envelopes OK?

A. Envelopes with plastic windows are accepted for Mixed Recycling. This small amount of plastic is sorted out at the processing plant.

Q6. What about paper shipping envelopes lined with bubble wrap?

A. Padded envelopes are not accepted for Mixed Recycling. This is a multi-layer mixed material product that cannot be effectively separated by recycling processors.

Q7. I've been putting shredded paper in a plastic bag, is that OK?

A. Plastic bags should always be kept out of Mixed Recycling and should not be used to contain shredded paper. Shredded paper should be put in a paper bag and stapled shut for curbside recycling so that it doesn't become loose and contaminate other recyclables. Because shredded paper is difficult to capture at the recycling center, the best option is to bring shredded paper to the ecopark, where it is kept separate for processing.

Q8. How do I recycle cardboard?

A. Cardboard boxes should be emptied (remove any plastic wrap, foam, packing materials etc.) and flattened. Large pieces should be reduced to 2 feet by 4 feet in size and placed in or next to recycle bins.



Q9. Should I tie bundles of cardboard together?

A. Cardboard should not be tied. Twine and string come loose during collection and wrap around the sorting equipment at the recycling center, causing down time and equipment failure.

Q10. Can I recycle phone books?

A. Softcover books, including phone books, are accepted for Mixed Recycling. Better yet, if you do not use printed phone books, you can opt out of receiving them by registering at the National Yellow Pages consumer choice website [here](#).

Q11. Can I recycle hardcover books?

A. Hardcover books are not accepted for Mixed Recycling. Consider donation or another reuse option first. If the books are out of date or cannot be reused, the pages need to be cut and separated from the binding to recycle the paper.

Metal

Q1. How do I recycle aluminum foil?

A. Aluminum foil must be clean and dry for recycling. Ball it up so that it is about the size of a baseball or larger to make sure that it is effectively sorted at the recycling center. Clean aluminum pans and trays are also acceptable for Mixed Recycling.



Q2. What types of aerosol cans are recyclable?

A. Empty aerosol cans that did not contain spray paint or pesticides are acceptable for curbside recycling. Caps should be reattached. Examples of acceptable empty aerosol cans include sun screen, shaving cream, and cooking oil. Full or partially full aerosol cans should be brought to Household Hazardous Waste collections (available twice a week at the ecopark [by appointment](#)). Completely empty spray paint and pesticide cans should be placed in the trash or brought to the ecopark for scrap metal recycling.



Q3. Is it OK to leave paper labels on food cans?

A. Yes, labels may be left on metal cans.

Q4. Can metal lids be recycled?

A. Metal lids can be recycled if they are left attached to cans. Metal bottle caps that cannot be reattached to glass bottles can be brought to the ecopark for recycling in scrap metal. Another option is to put caps and lids into cans of matching metal (for example, steel lids into steel cans and aluminum caps into aluminum cans). Pinch the tops of the cans to hold the caps in.



Q5. Why can't I recycle small propane tanks, like the Coleman™ ones used for camping and cooking?

A. Because the gas cannot be effectively discharged, small amounts of propane remain in "empty" propane tanks, which act as an explosive when they are compressed by collection trucks and balers at the recycling center. This can cause fires and explosions and is extremely dangerous for employees collecting recyclables curbside and at the recycling center. [Bring these propane tanks to the ecopark for recycling.](#)

Q6. Can I recycle pots and pans?

A. Yes, metal pots and pans are accepted for Mixed Recycling. If they are in good condition, consider donation or another reuse option instead. Glass lids should not be included for recycling.

Glass

Q1. What types of glass can I recycle?

A. Glass bottles and jars are accepted for Mixed Recycling.

Q2. Why can't I recycle drinking glasses or window glass curbside?

A. Non-bottle glass including dishware, light bulbs, heat resistant glass (Pyrex™), mirror and window glass have a different melting point than bottle glass. These materials can damage the furnace used during glass manufacturing and cause impurities in new containers.



Q3. What happens to the glass that I recycle curbside?

A. Glass that is processed in mixed recycling Material Recovery Facilities (MRF) including the MCRC, is typically sent for Beneficial Use at landfills. The NYSDEC has given landfills across the state approval to use MRF glass as Alternative Daily Cover, reducing the amount of virgin soil necessary to cover waste at the end of the working day. Glass can also be used as road base or in construction efforts at landfills. MRF glass is a low quality commodity because it is typically contaminated with a number of plastic and paper items. In states where there is a Bottle Bill (such as New York), glass manufacturers have a consistent supply of high quality recycled glass to purchase from redemption centers where the glass is clean and color sorted.

Q4. What happens to the glass that I recycle at stores and redemption centers?

A. Returnable glass bottles are recycled into new glass bottles and other products. If you want your glass bottles to be recycled into new materials, the best option is to bring them back to the store or to redemption centers.

