

Recycling and Reusing Make a Difference

Last Saturday morning, my friend, Lisa, posted a photo on Facebook comparing a jellyfish in a glass jar with a plastic bag in a glass jar. The caption indicated that a hungry sea turtle might not differentiate between the two. I commented that my husband and I shop with reusable tote bags and recycle any plastic bags we do receive. We concluded our online conversation by agreeing that recycling and reusing are simple actions that have a huge impact on the environment when many people in a community participate. Interestingly enough, I then checked my memories and up popped a post from February 18, 2012 about our new compost bin. I said, “We recycle almost all paper, glass, and plastic. We use cloth napkins and I am getting better at remembering to take my reusable bags to the grocery store.”

Five years later, between recycling and composting vegetable scraps and yard material, we have little actual garbage to take to the local convenience center. This article isn't about me patting myself on the back. I know that many of you, especially if you are gardeners, recycle everything you possibly can. If you are like me, you probably know a few folks who don't recycle, because “It's too much trouble” or “I don't know what kind of plastic I can put in the recycle bin.” Well, help has arrived!

A quick online search revealed many local and national sites offering information on recycling, from whether to separate glass, plastic, and paper, to how to read the plastics code on the bottom of a container.

The Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) website contains the page “Recycling Around Town.” Information about recycling household items and yard and hazardous waste is provided, along with addresses and phone numbers for disposal sites for specific items, such as cell phones, computers, and other electronic devices. Local landfills will accept paper products, including corrugated cardboard; glass jars and bottles; aluminum and scrap metal; tires; used oil; and plastic containers marked #1 and #2. The information is provided for Gloucester and York Counties, Newport News, and Williamsburg and James City County.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website tells us that each year Americans create 258 million tons of trash, of which 169 million tons end up in a landfill! That is a lot of waste, but we can reduce that amount simply by taking a few extra minutes each day to separate recyclable and reusable materials from actual garbage. In 2014, nearly 30% of municipal waste in U.S. landfills was comprised of paper and Americans used about 3.3 million tons of plastics, but only 9.5 % of the total was recycled.

Benefits of recycling and reusing include a decrease in the amount of waste going to landfills; conservation of natural resources; and reduction of greenhouse gas emission and other air and water pollutants. According to the EPA site, used motor oil from a single oil change dumped down the drain or into one of our streams or creeks will contaminate a million gallons of water. Hazardous pesticides and fertilizers also pose a risk to the waterways of our county. Used tires provide habitat for mosquitoes and disease-carrying rodents, as well as being a fire risk.

If you are attempting to encourage a friend or family member to recycle, share the information on the VIMS website. Offer to help the person sort items the first few times. After a few weeks, the neighbor or relative probably will start to feel good about engaging in an activity that yields positive results.

We all slip up now and then and dump the coffee grounds into the garbage instead of the compost bin or wrap something exceptionally stinky in plastic to dispose of it, but the positive actions we take by recycling most of the time will far outweigh the “oops” moments. And you will get better at remembering to take the reusable tote bags to the grocery store.

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