

TIPS FOR A GREENER LIFESTYLE!

How can we live sustainably?

IN THIS SERIES WE EXPLORE HOW WE CAN BE SUSTAINABLE TOGETHER,
RIGHT HERE IN ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY!



THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

RECYCLING 102: WHY IS RECYCLING SO HARD?

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The recycling industry doesn't make it easy. For recycling educators, our world is filled with exceptions, asterisks and fine print.

Fortunately, you don't have to be an expert to improve your recycling etiquette, and chances are you're not recycling 100% correctly all the time.

In this column I'll bust some myths, explain some of the reason for the confusion, and get you back on track with a few simple, asterisk-proof guidelines.

Myth #1: 'Why bother, it all goes in the trash anyways.'

"If I help my neighbor follow the rules, I'll ensure none of the recycling is trashed." There – fixed it for you. Recyclable materials **DO** get recycled, **IF** they are placed on the correct path. Modern American recycling is weird, and that holds in Athens too. Private companies, even huge corporations, depend on the local collection of recyclables. Those local collections are often done at local

governments' expense, and rely on local government staff to get it done correctly.

One mistake doesn't send the entire truckload of recyclable material to the landfill, but too many mistakes will slow down the entire process, and some mistakes render nearby recyclables unrecoverable (think nacho cheese snuggled against magazines in the truck... in July). When truckloads exceed 25% contamination (stuff that shouldn't be included in mixed recyclables, like plastic bags and Styrofoam) those loads are packed up and sent to the landfill. **This is rare.**

Myth #2: 'If my recyclables are so valuable, why don't I get paid for them? Worse, why do I have to pay to get them collected?'

Your spent bottles, cans and paper aren't worth very much at all. Sorry folks. But once they are separated from each other and added together with like materials, their value skyrockets.

Currently, cardboard is selling for approximately \$108 per ton. But that is for bales or bricks the size of a home refrigerator. And we only get that top bulk pricing if there are 20 tons of those bricks loaded onto a single tractor-trailer truck. **Oh, and nothing but cardboard** – if more than 3% of the total weight is anything other than cardboard, the price drops. That includes the metal wires holding the bales together. See why we get cranky about Styrofoam left in the boxes?

Like a lot of services, the expensive part is getting a truck to your home or place of work and paying the driver a living wage to do so.

Myth #3: ‘I don’t know if this thing is recyclable or not, but if I just include it in my cart, they’ll figure it out.’

Wrong! The people who work in the recycling facility are on their feet 10 hours a day, sorting through 70+ tons per day of miscellaneous packaging zooming past them on conveyor belts. They don’t have time to inspect each item – they are trying to hit the industry standard of 50+ picks per minute. They get a lot of help from

machinery, but on any given day there are a dozen sets of backs, brains and hands hard at work inside the recycling facility in Athens.

With that last one in mind, recycling in Athens has shifted over the last decade from ‘Recycle More!’ to ‘Recycle Right!’ Now the mantra is ‘If in Doubt, Throw it Out!’ in an effort to protect what has been properly recycled. That shift is due mostly to (wait for it....) money.

All of that packaging you place in your recycling cart or dumpster enters the commodity market, meaning the prices fluctuate. That \$108 ton of cardboard described above was only selling for \$48 this time last year. Local government education efforts don’t have enough funding to chase market price fluctuations. Instead, we try to keep it as simple as possible:

“Place clean, empty containers, paper and empty, flattened cardboard in your recycling cart.”

That guidance will cover about 70% of what can be recycled in Athens. To learn more about the rest, visit www.accgov.com/recycling.

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