

# It's Easy to be Green

Donna Krug,  
Barton County Agent  
Family and Consumer Sciences

Fact Sheet

## Introduction

Being “green” means doing small things every day to make a difference in the world. There are countless ways to reduce the amount of waste you and your family produce.

In the past – even 50 to 100 years ago – “living green” was called “living simply.” Clothes were hung out to dry, gardens provided organic food, and homes were cooled by opening windows. Their “green” living came out of necessity, but many people now see wisdom in that way of living. In the 21st century living “green” has become a buzzword for a more environmentally friendly lifestyle.

According to 2007 figures from the Environmental Protection Agency, each day Americans produce 4.6 pounds of municipal solid waste per person. However, more than 33 percent (up from about 10 percent in 1985) of all municipal solid waste generated in the United States is recycled. There is still more to do, and you can help.

How can you become part of the solution? The symbol for recycling includes three arrows moving in a triangle. Each arrow represents a different part of the recycling process, from collection to re-manufacture to resale. Do your part to keep recycling working and growing. Purchasing recycled-content products will help increase market demand for those products and ensure the viability of recycling programs.



## What Numbers on Plastic Mean

Number	Type of plastic	Common packaging uses
#1	Polyethylene terephthalate (PETE or PET)	Soft drink, juice, water, detergent, and cleaner bottles; cooking oil and peanut butter jars.
#2	High density polyethylene (HDPE)	Milk, water jugs, butter tubs; detergent and shampoo bottles; grocery, trash and retail bags
#3	Polyvinyl chloride (PVC or vinyl)	Cooking oil and detergent bottles, peanut butter jars, water jugs; medical tubing; siding, window frames, floor tiles and carpet backing
#4	Low density polyethylene (LDPE)	Dry cleaning, bread and frozen food bags, grocery bags, squeezable bottles
#5	Polypropylene (PP)	Caps, disks, syrup bottles, yogurt tubs, straws, film packaging, and medicine containers and bottles
#6	Polystyrene (PS)	Foam cups and plates, plastic cutlery, compact disc jackets, clear trays, egg cartons
#7	Other (often polycarbonate (PC))	Reusable water bottles, beverage and food bottles

Source: [http://www.kdheks.gov/kdsi/pg10\\_symbols\\_defined.html](http://www.kdheks.gov/kdsi/pg10_symbols_defined.html)

## You Can Recycle Almost Everything

Many communities offer some sort of recycling facility. Depending on the population and the interest of local leaders, the variety of items that can be recycled differs.

**Become familiar with recycling efforts are going on in your community.** Ask for a list of items that are accepted as well as those that are not accepted. Look for ways to reuse the non-recyclable items to keep them out of the landfill. If you still are not sure about where to take certain items for recycling, visit the Web

site [www.Earth911.org](http://www.Earth911.org). Enter the type of material you wish to recycle, along with your zip code, and it will list places to take the item, complete with a map to the location. Most communities accept No. 1 and No. 2 plastics. Recycling other types of plastics (designated by numbers 3 through 7) depends on the municipality.



PETE



HDPE

There is a market for recycled plastics. Once collected and sorted, plastic is processed into small pellets or flakes and sold to manufacturers to create new plastic products. Most of the No. 1 and No. 2 bottles and containers are turned into fiber, including carpet and clothing, as well as nonfood containers, including detergent, motor oil and household cleaner bottles.

**America has the capacity to recycle more.** According to the American Plastics Council, only 25 percent of the nation's recycling capacity is being used.

**Reduce when you can.** Try to cut down on the amount of plastics you use. Alternatives – such as cloth shopping bags, reusable water bottles, and refillable containers – can go a long way toward reducing the amount of plastics that enter the waste stream.

**Use products made from recycled plastic.** Look for those labeled “made with recycled content” or those “made with post-consumer recycled content.” The latter are made with materials that have been used, rather than with manufacturing waste.

**Consider “precycling.”** Avoid excess packaging. Purchasing items in bulk or loose, rather than prepackaged, reduces what is thrown away. Ask that small purchases not be sacked.

### Did You Know?

\$1 out of every \$10 we spend pays for packaging.

Packaging makes up  $\frac{1}{3}$  of our waste by weight,  $\frac{1}{2}$  by volume.

**Recycle glass.** It is one of the most frequently recycled materials, both because of the purity of the ingredients and the quick turnaround in recycling.

**Recycle cardboard, newspapers and magazines.** A family will also reduce its volume of trash when these items are recycled. (Shred junk mail and bills before recycling.)

## Challenges in Recycling

Modern technology – telephones, radios, television sets, computers and cell phones – has changed the way we live. However, the brisk pace of technological change means the devices become obsolete quickly.

Old electronics often contain dangerous elements, such as lead and mercury, that can contaminate soil and water. Safe disposal of electronic devices is a concern. Some electronics manufacturers have recycling programs. You may also be able to find other companies or organizations that specialize in recycling electronics. Some communities collect old cell phones, reprogram them and provide them for emergency use.

## Get Back to the Basics

How can you do your part to be green? Start by reducing your ecological footprint by consuming less energy and water, and reducing solid waste.

Next, be creative and find multiple uses for a product to keep it out of the landfill.

And finally, recycle. Consumers have a role in the process by recycling and then purchasing products made from recycled materials.

## Decomposition Times

How long does it take for garbage to decompose in the environment? Below is a list of common items thrown away every day.

Glass bottle .....	1 million years	Plastic bag .....	10-20 years
Monofilament fishing line.....	600 years	Cigarette butt .....	1-5 years
Plastic beverage bottles.....	450 years	Wool sock .....	1-5 years
Disposable diapers .....	450 years	Plywood .....	1-3 years
Aluminum can .....	80-200 years	Waxed milk carton .....	3 months
Foamed plastic cups.....	50 years	Apple core.....	2 months
Rubber boot sole .....	50-80 years	Newspaper .....	6 weeks
Tin cans .....	50 years	Orange or banana peel .....	2-5 weeks
Leather .....	50 years	Paper towel.....	2-4 weeks
Nylon fabric .....	30-40 years		

Information Source: U.S. National Park Service; Mote Marine Lab, Sarasota, FL

## References:

EHMI – Environmental Hazards Management Institute – daily recycler for home and office, 2002.

*Municipal Solid Waste Generation, Recycling, and Disposal in the United States: Facts and Figures for 2007.*

Environmental Protection Agency; available at [www.epa.gov/osw/nonhaz/municipal/msw99.htm#links](http://www.epa.gov/osw/nonhaz/municipal/msw99.htm#links)

Sunflower First Step Recycling Center, Great Bend, Kan.

<http://earth911.org/recycling>

<http://www.worldwatch.org>

<http://www.earthshare.org>

## More about plastic packaging symbols

[http://www.kdheks.gov/kdsi/pg10\\_symbols\\_defined.html](http://www.kdheks.gov/kdsi/pg10_symbols_defined.html)

<http://www.thedailygreen.com/green-homes/latest/recycling-symbols-plastics-460321>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resin\\_identification\\_code](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resin_identification_code)

## Recycle symbols:

<http://www.packaginggraphics.net/plastic-recycle-logos.htm>

## Reviewers

Berny Unruh, Barton County 4-H Youth Development Agent

Mary Lou Odle, Saline County FCS Agent

Jan Stephens, K-State Research and Extension FNHS specialist

Libby Curry, K-State Research and Extension FCS specialist

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

Publications from Kansas State University are available on the World Wide Web at: [www.ksre.ksu.edu](http://www.ksre.ksu.edu)

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit Donna Krug, *It's Easy to Be Green*, Fact Sheet, Kansas State University, August 2009.

**Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service**

MF2886

August 2009

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, Fred A. Cholick, Director.