

# Don Cunningham: The Truth About Recycling, And Why You Should Do It Anyway

By Don Cunningham

LEHIGH VALLEY — You learn a lot about your neighbors during a morning walk on recycling collection day.

All those bins overflowing with empty bottles and cans and cardboard are a little slice of life into what's going behind those front doors.

The bins with a lot of empty liquor bottles grab my attention. I get to see what I'm missing out on and who I should be befriending for a future invite.

More than anything, I'm impressed with the diligence of my Bethlehem neighbors in segregating their waste into component parts. The real obsessive-compulsive ones organize it so neatly it nearly looks like the store shelf it started on. Folded cereal boxes, string-wrapped cardboard and crushed aluminum cans.

The bins at our house are a co-mingled mess. My primary effort is to bury the wine, whiskey or beer bottles at the bottom after a particularly bad — or good — two weeks. I don't need the other voyeur walkers like me knocking on my door.

My dad once called my stepmom a "recycling genius."

She's full-blooded Pennsylvania Dutch and about as fastidious and organized as one gets. Her goal was to get the household trash down to just one grocery store bag a week.

I have adopted one of her special techniques ? dispatching with the mail at the recycling bin. Ninety-five percent of our mail now doesn't make it in the house.

There's a special allure to recycling. A sense of accomplishment, organization, and control. And the belief that you're doing something good for the planet.

This is where it begins to break down a bit.

Like any other good or commodity, the value and reuse of recycled materials ebbs and flows with market conditions, available technology and innovation and the global market.

It's with great pain that I inform my fellow recyclers that often our work doesn't bring our waste products back to life in a new form. They just end up buried in a

landfill like the stuff in that one small bag of my stepmom's garbage.

According to a recent report by Matthew Shear in The New York Times Magazine, last year only 5% of the plastic waste consumed in the U.S. was recycled back into plastic. Glass was recycled at 31% and aluminum at 50%. The remainder ended up in a landfill.

Much of this is caused by China no longer accepting recycled material from the United States. America's dirty little recycling secret was that the major market for our recycled materials was to send it back to China where much of it was initially produced.

There is some good news.

Cardboard last year was recycled at the outstanding rate of 90 to 91%.

According to the most recent U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data, 65% of the waste actually recycled in the U.S. is fiber-based.

"I'm hesitant to call anything recession-proof," Tim Cooper of the market-research and testing firm Smither told The New York Times, "but corrugated packaging is close."

Production of cardboard has exploded along with e-commerce. Market estimates are for the international corrugated packing market to reach \$205 billion in gross domestic product by 2025. That's larger than the total GDP of most countries.

So, at least in the realm of recycling, there's no need to feel bad about all those cardboard package deliveries on your doorstep, as long as you don't throw it away.

But keep an eye on your collections.

This summer I witnessed one of those moments that make you laugh and cry.

The office building where I work has a very advanced system for segregating its trash. There are eight different disposal bins to break down refuse into very specific items from office paper to corrugated cardboard to different shades of glass and so on.

The Sunday morning collection crew has a much less advanced system.

I watched all those bins get emptied into one container: a garbage truck.

In fairness, they may just be aware of the China situation and the imploded resale market for most recycled products.

It's a global economy, not just for what comes into the U.S. but what goes out. The world is interconnected. We found that out during the pandemic.

But it's not only baby food that's made in only a handful of plants in the world. The same goes for semiconductors which in the age of technology appear in products ranging from toys to missiles and everything in between.

Taiwan produces about 70% of the global supply.

"A world without Taiwan is a world back to the Stone Age," a semiconductor executive said recently.

So, if you think a Chinese invasion of Taiwan like the Russian invasion of Ukraine — based on some leader's historic viewpoint of land mass control — doesn't matter, think again. It will make us long for the supply chain challenges of the 2020-21 pandemic.

In a world of pandemics, natural disasters, and wars, both real and of the trade and tariff variety, it's dangerous to have all our eggs in a basket located far away with a handle that can break. The good news is there's movement to change that.

The U.S. government and companies are investing to reestablish mission critical production and redundant supply chains closer to population centers. The Lehigh Valley is at the core of that. Manufacturing once again is the region's number one economic sector, pumping out more than \$8 billion in products from more than 750 manufacturers. There will one day be a stronger market for recycled plastics, glass and aluminum. Don't stop segregating and recycling. That time will come.



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