

Glass Recycling: Just How Clear Is It?

Solid Waste Management Fact Sheet No. 24

Glass recycling seems like it should be fairly straight forward. Glass bottles and jars are melted down and made into new ones, right? Right. But as is usually the case with recycling, it's only that simple if the sorting and processing of the glass are done correctly before it gets to the meltdown point. At the same time, some recycling centers aren't taking glass because they can't sell it, yet the glass recyclers are saying they can't find enough glass to buy. So, what's the story?

As most of you know, glass containers consist primarily of three colors: clear, brown (amber), and green. Clear glass allows consumers to see a product and that helps sales. However, some products degrade when exposed to sunlight and so are packaged in green or brown glass. Glass recyclers want these colors kept separated to ensure color consistency of the new container being made. So if one brown bottle is dropped into a clear glass bin and shatters, that pile of clear glass becomes contaminated and the whole pile may end up in the landfill.

The problem is not that there isn't enough glass to recycle, it's that there isn't enough "quality" supply. Besides mixing colors, there are other contaminants that can reduce the quality of a load of glass:

- * ceramics such as cups, dishes, and ovenware
- * stones and dirt
- * mirror or window glass
- * heat-resistant glass such as pyrex
- * metals such as caps and steel lids
- * light bulbs and filaments
- * lead-based glass such as crystal or TV tubes.

These kinds of contaminants not only damage the container that is made, they can also damage the processing plant equipment. In general, if it's not a bottle or jar, it may not be recyclable with your glass. Check with your local recycler if you're not sure.

So how do we make sure glass remanufacturers get "quality" glass? Until the glass industry develops the technology to better deal with contaminants, the best bet is to better inform consumers. If you are coordinating a recycling collection program at your office or in your community that accepts glass, think of ways to help participants better understand why glass must be sorted and free of contaminants.

One more bit of information: the reason green glass is not widely accepted by recyclers is because it's not as marketable. Apparently we import more green glass into this country than we manufacture which creates a glut in the market. And watch out--some green bottles look like clear glass. The clue is in the bottom seam of the bottle. If it's got a greenish hue, it's green glass.

For more information, contact the Glass Packaging Institute, 1627 K Street NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20006. Phone (202)887-4850.

Adapted from "Waste Reduction and Recycling News." United States Forest Service. December, 1994.

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