

Plastic Recycling: A Guide to Proper Curbside Disposal in Albany

Plastic is ubiquitous in modern life. From water bottles and food containers to cosmetic products, packaging, and even clothing, this inexpensive and easily shaped material is everywhere. With this ever-growing list of plastic waste to handle and dispose of, it can be challenging to decipher which items actually belong in the recycling bin.



In California, most residents and businesses are used to the idea of sorting waste—after all, the state has set high sustainability ambitions to promote waste diversion and the circular economy. Even though placing plastic items in the recycling container can potentially help divert these materials from landfills, sorting is the beginning of the recycling journey and not the end. And to get it right, businesses and residents must understand that contrary to popular belief, **not all plastics are the same**, and not all plastic items can be recycled. That’s because these materials come in all shapes, grades, and resin types, making them more or less likely to be manufactured into new products.

But how can you know what is recyclable to avoid contaminating the recycling cart?

[Click here to download a sorting guide on what belongs in recycling and compost.](#)

Recycle Plastic Items by Shape

Albany’s curbside recycling program accepts **paper, cardboard, metal cans, glasses, and plastic**. The first four materials can be placed straight into the recycling bin as long as they are clean and dry. Now, when it comes to sorting plastic items, **forget the chasing arrow and focus on shape**.



Plastic **bottles** (water and soda packaging), **tubs** (coffee, cottage cheese, sauces, and dips), **jugs** (cleaning products, milk), and **jars** (peanut butter) are generally accepted in the recycling stream. Wipe out any product residue, and they are good to go.



Plastic items are recycled by shape.

Plastic bags, cups, plates, utensils, black plastic, clamshell containers (hinged or lidded), candy wrappers, snack bags, plastic films, and polystyrene containers are not considered recyclable material, given their low market value, and should, therefore, be placed in the trash. And remember, if you really want to make a positive impact and avoid contamination charges, do not bag recyclable items in plastic. Place them loose in your recycling container.



But What About that Chasing Arrow?

To decide if a plastic item should go into the recycling bin, most of us scan the packaging for the chasing arrow (♻️) or the triangle loop. Although this symbol has become synonymous with recycling, it is unfortunately present in many items that have low to no recyclability potential.



Generally, the chasing arrow comes accompanied by numbers, a resin identification code intended to inform recycling facilities what type of plastic material a specific item is made of. As a rule of thumb, the higher the number, the more difficult it is to be recycled. However, the chasing arrows proved themselves a confusing recycling indicator from the start, as not all materials that share the same resin code are made of the same chemical properties.



For instance, a water bottle is considered a polyethylene terephthalate material and usually has the characteristic #1 PETE symbol stamped on its bottom, indicating its acceptability at various curbside recycling programs. But this same numeric symbol can be found on clamshell containers—commonly used for takeout and to package delicate fruits such as blueberries—, even though this malleable and versatile resin is not accepted.

As you can see, the chasing arrows and the resin identification codes (RICs) are not the best indicators to inform the recyclability of materials. So what can consumers and businesses do to identify recyclable materials and prevent contamination? The answer varies by region. Across the nation, municipalities, in partnership with local recycling programs, work to determine what items are accepted in curbside recycling, which largely depends on the market demand for post-consumer recycled plastics. If you live in Albany, Calif., however, the task is straightforward: **recycle by shape**.

Help is on the Way to Make Recycling Easier

California Senate Bill 54 is being developed now to reduce non-recyclable plastic waste in California so that all food ware and packaging materials sold in the state are actually recyclable or compostable by 2032. This shifts the burden to producers of those materials rather than the consumer.

To learn more about this effort, visit: <https://calrecycle.ca.gov/package/package-epr/>