

Recycling by the Numbers



The Society of the Plastics Industry recently released a by-the-numbers informative list including information regarding recyclable plastics commonly used in the labeling industry. While the confusion over what is and is not recyclable continues to confound customers, it has been found that plastics are particularly troublesome, as different types of plastic require different processing to be reformulated and re-used as raw materials. In addition, some cities accept all types of plastic for recycling, while many others choose to accept only particular jugs, containers, and bottles with specific numbers stamped on the bottom. What do these numbers mean?

Recycling by the Numbers

The symbol code that is often times seen stamped on the bottom of recyclable products is a single digit number ranging from 1 to 7, and is surrounded by a triangle of arrows. This symbol was designed by The Society of the Plastics Industry (SPI) in 1988 to allow consumers and recyclers to differentiate types of plastics while providing a uniform coding system for manufacturers.

The numbers, which 39 U.S. states now require to be molded or imprinted on all eight-ounce to five-gallon containers can accept the half-inch minimum-size symbol, identify the type of plastic. According to the American Plastics Council, an industry trade group, the symbols also are a helpful tool for recyclers, allowing them to do their jobs more effectively.

Easy Plastics to Recycle

The easiest and most common plastics to recycle are made of polyethylene terephthalate (PETE), and are assigned the number 1. Examples include soda and water bottles, medicine containers, and many other common consumer product containers. Once it has been processed by a recycling facility, PETE can become fiberfill for winter coats, sleeping bags, and life jackets. It can also be used to make bean bags, rope, car bumpers, tennis ball felt, combs, cassette tapes, sails for boats, furniture, and (of course) other plastic bottles.

Number 2 is reserved for high-density polyethylene plastics. These include heavier containers that hold laundry detergents and bleaches, as well as milk, shampoo, and motor oil. Plastic labeled with the number 2 is often recycled into toys, piping, plastic lumber, and rope. Like plastic designated as a number 1, it is widely accepted at recycling centers.

Plastics Less Commonly Recycled

Polyvinyl chloride, commonly used in plastic pipes, shower curtains, medical tubing, vinyl dashboards, and even some baby bottle nipples, gets a number 3 rating. Like numbers 4 (wrapping films, grocery and sandwich bags, and other containers made of low-density polyethylene) and 5 (polypropylene containers used in Tupperware, among other products), few municipal recycling centers will accept it due to its very low rate of recyclability.

Another Useful Plastic to Recycle

Number 6 goes on polystyrene (Styrofoam) items, such as coffee cups, disposable cutlery, meat trays, packing “peanuts”, and insulation. It is widely accepted because it can be reprocessed into many items, including cassette tapes and rigid foam insulation.

Hardest Plastics to Recycle

Last, but far from least, are items crafted from various combinations of the aforementioned plastics, or from unique plastic formulations not commonly used. Usually imprinted with a number 7 or nothing at all, these plastics are the most difficult to recycle and, as such, are seldom collected or recycled. More ambitious consumers can feel free to return such items to the product manufacturers to avoid contributing to the local waste stream, and instead put the burden on the makers to recycle or dispose of the items properly.

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