

Make your home more earth-friendly--one trash bag at a time.

by Amanda MacMillan

America has had some trashy affairs: In 1969, Ohio's garbage- and oil-laden Cuyahoga River was so polluted it caught fire. Eighteen years later, a stranded trash barge sailed the East Coast for 7 months, searching for a landfill where it could unload more than 3,000 tons of waste. Six states and three countries turned it away before the cargo was eventually incinerated.

We've cleaned up our act considerably, thanks to national recycling efforts and stricter disposal laws. And we've earned a big health payoff: For instance, in the past decade, there has been a 45% reduction in cancer risk in California, due in part to the decrease in air and water pollutants, reports the Air Resources Board. Nevertheless, there's more work to do. In 2003, the average American generated almost 4.5 pounds of garbage each day, up from nearly 3.3 pounds in 1970. And about 70% went into dumps or incinerators, not the recycling bin. But with a little research, you can recycle almost anything--last night's dinner, last season's technology, or even that fuchsia bridesmaid dress from the last millennium. Here, 21 things not to trash.

1. Computers

Your out-of-date PC holds not only years' worth of vacation photos, but also toxins such as chromium, cadmium, and lead that can contaminate food and water supplies if the computer gets crushed, dumped in a landfill, or incinerated. These toxins can cause serious health problems, including headaches, seizures, kidney damage, and cancer. Instead of tossing your dead PC, send it back to the manufacturer; many will accept nonworking computers for a small fee (up to about \$34). They'll safely open your machine, extract the components, and recycle the majority of the material for other products. If the computer you're going to eighty-six still works, donate it. Wipe the hard drive clean (ShredIt can do that for you; \$20; [Mireth.com](#)). Then contact the National Cristina Foundation ([Cristina.org](#)); they'll match you with a school or organization in need.

2. Cell Phones

That old mobile contains many of the same toxic materials as a computer, but it can help build a new life for someone else. The Wireless Foundation, a national nonprofit organization, will reprogram your phone with emergency numbers and shelter info and distribute it to a woman at risk of domestic violence. Drop phones at the Body Shop or visit [CallToProtect.org](#) for other locations.

3-4. Other Electronics

If you're ditching a TV set, PDA, camera, or MP3 player, visit [RecycleForBreastCancer.org](#). The organization will send you prepaid shipping labels, recycle your goods for a profit, and then donate all the money to a national breast cancer charity. They'll accept printer cartridges, too. (You can also check with a Staples or Office Depot near you; many will safely dispose of used cartridges.)

8-11. Items with Mercury

Fourteen years ago, scientists discovered that just 1 g of liquid mercury per year--the kind found in thermometers, thermostats, and some bug zappers and lightbulb--could pollute a 20-acre lake, making the fish inedible. Though thermometers are no longer made with mercury, plenty of old ones still contain the stuff. So when you're ready to get rid of yours, take them to a hazardous-waste recycling collection facility. There, the mercury is extracted and eventually sold to scientists. Visit [Earth911.org](#) to find a facility in your area.

12-16. Car Junk

A garage, salvage yard, or public works department may be able to mix your old antifreeze and motor oil with new fluids to reuse or resell. Call first to make sure and ask how they want it transported. Some also take brake and transmission fluid and gasoline for safe disposal.

17. Paint

Has burnt sienna made its last appearance on your walls? Ask your local high school drama department, church, or Habitat for Humanity if they accept donations of unused paint. If you have the latex variety, you can also find a reuse-and-recycle program through [Earth911.org](#); your paint will be blended with new materials and resold.

18-21. Batteries

When your rechargeable batteries (including Ni-Cds, Ni-MHs, cell phone and laptop types, and others) finally wear out, bring them to a RadioShack. (Call 877-273-2925 for a complete list.) They'll be disassembled at a recycling facility; the recovered nickel and iron will be reused in stainless-steel products, and the cadmium will be saved to fuel new batteries. (Regular batteries may be recycled, too. Check with your community recycling facility.) Car, boat, and motorcycle batteries contain lead and should also be recycled; many auto shops will take your old battery when you buy a new one.

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