



by Kris Kaar

The choice to recycle is in the hands of all of us, and it does make a difference. The advent of curbside collection makes it easier than ever to participate in the effort to direct unwanted or unneeded product containers and materials away from landfills, but procedures and regulations are often confusing and can create frustration and skepticism about the entire system. Actions by waste haulers such as tagging and not accepting contents of bins contaminated by non-recyclable items are meant to protect the machinery and speed up the process downstream, yet in reality they may anger residents and build apathy toward recycling in general. A little education can go a long way to raise our spirits and keep us involved.

Single stream, or curbside consumer recycling, puts glass, plastic, paper and steel into a single cart, separate from trash and yard waste or food scraps. A materials recovery facility (MRF) is designed to receive and sort the materials we place at the curb or in the alley for recycling. It is not the end destination, but an interim location.

The MRF separates cans, glass, paper and plastic from each other. Each type of item must be isolated and compressed into bales or stockpiled until there is enough to transport to an end market. MRFs use special equipment to identify specific items such as aluminum cans; magnets capture the steel cans.

Plastics can be sorted by the type of resin mixture, as identified by the numbers one through seven on the bottom.

The end market is the re-processor or manufacturing destination that transforms the recyclable material into its next stage. For example, this is where the plastic bottles can be ground into flakes that are sold to be made into carpets or where paper is pulped to be made into a recycled paper product. These markets vary depending on the composition of the recyclable item or what the item is destined to become. The process of reusing these materials requires specific types of feedstock materials.

Recycling is a dynamic industry, and methods have evolved to recover as much useful material as possible, so the way we learned to recycle 10 years ago may no longer be correct. Not all communities include the same items in their recycling program, because MRFs and end markets have regional impact. Check local information and think about what we're putting into the cart/bin; if in doubt, call and ask. It's important to understand what materials are included in our recycling program. Sometimes residents interpret an item as recyclable just from its appearance, when it should be donated or repurposed, or as a last resort, taken to the landfill.

Plastic milk bottles are not the same as a plastic toy, garden hoses, baby seats or strings of holiday lights. Just because an item contains plastic doesn't always mean it is recyclable. Glass food and beverage bottles and jars are not made with the same ingredients or by the same process as a drinking glass and ceramic mugs, plates or cookware. The responsibility is shared between consumers and companies in the recycling industry to clarify what can be recycled.

*Kris Kaar is a senior consultant with RRS (Resource Recycling System) and president of the Illinois Recycling Association. Contact her at [KKaar@Recycle.com](mailto:KKaar@Recycle.com) or visit [IllinoisRecycles.org](http://IllinoisRecycles.org). RRS is a sustainability and recycling consulting firm serving communities, companies and organizations. Visit [Recycle.com](http://Recycle.com).*

## Best Candidates for Recycling at Home or Office

When feeling unsure of what to include in a recycling program, start with the basics, but always check with community programs. Information can be found on many municipal websites.

**Good:** Paper; newspapers, magazines, box materials such as cereal or crackers, corrugated boxes, milk cartons, juice and soup cartons—greasy cardboard (pizza boxes) may not be accepted by all recyclers; aluminum cans; steel (tin) cans; plastic bottles (not garden hoses, plastic bags or toys); and glass bottles and jars (not ceramic cups, drinking glasses, windows, light bulbs or mirrors).

**No Good:** Many items that show up at a materials recovery facility can ruin the value of recyclable materials or can jam or break equipment. Do not put these items in the recycling cart/bin: disposable diapers and baby wipes; plastic bags; appliances; electronics; needles or sharps of any kind; and food scraps.

The disposal of some organics such yard waste and plants is regulated by Illinois law.