

RECYCLING MADE EASY

Most homeowners are aware of the importance of recycling, and most have good intentions. But recycling regularly in your home isn't always easy to do. Busy schedules, hectic mealtimes and constant distractions can divert even the most ardent recyclers from completing the task at hand and making sure all waste materials wind up in the proper place.

However, with the right setup, a little forethought and some practice, as well as a commitment to see the job through, recycling can become as simple as ... well, throwing out the trash.

Professional home organizer Colleen Warmingham, owner of Space Inventors in Allentown, Pa., has helped clients set up home recycling systems and is also involved in her own personal recycling effort. She knows many of the pitfalls and offers valuable advice that can make recycling easy for any homeowner.

Check Local Programs

The first step in creating an effective recycling center, according to Warmingham, is to determine what items can be recycled in your area. Contact your municipality to find out if it has established a recycling program and if so, what types of waste materials it accepts. Does the municipality offer curbside pickup or will you have to take the recyclables to a recycling center? Are bins provided or must you use your own containers? Which items can be commingled and which must be separated out?

For instance, you might have to separate office paper from newspapers, but perhaps you can recycle glass, plastic and cans in the same container. "You need to get a grip on what your options are and how your municipality needs to receive the recyclables," Warmingham explains.

Anne Reichman, a recycling advocate and program director of Earth 911, a national environmental resource that maintains a phone hotline (800-253-2687) and a website (www.earth911.com), says her organization can help. According to Reichman, the Earth 911 website makes it easy to find out about the recycling options in your area. Simply enter your zip code, city or state into a field at the top of the site's home page and list the types of materials you want to recycle (batteries, tires, computers, motor oil and so forth). All the recycling options in your area will then be listed. This one-stop information center makes short work of the important first step in setting up a home recycling system.

Assess Your Recyclables

The second step, according to Warmingham, is to determine what types of trash you and your family generate. She notes that someone who runs a home business will have a lot of office paper trash. Another with a magazine habit will have piles of glossy paper. A dedicated cook might have lots of cans, bottles and glass. Figure out what the most voluminous parts of your possible recyclables will be based on your habits and lifestyle.

Warmingham's third step is the key to the whole process: Try to marry step one and step two for successful recycling. "You want to have stuff in containers the way your municipality or recycling center accepts it. But that may not perfectly line up with how you generate your trash," she says. "This is where the premise of organizing and sorting items where you use them comes into play."

Analyze how and where you generate recyclables, and put smaller collection containers in each of those areas. For instance, Warmingham says she keeps a paper recycling box in her office to hold the mounds of paper trash she generates from her home business, and also has a separate container for reusable paper — that which has printing on only one side or is partially blank to use for printer testing or as scrap paper.

Convenience is Key

In the kitchen, Warmingham advises, you might want to place another container for paper if you open mail there. "You want [the recycling receptacle] close and you want it convenient. If it's convenient, you will use it. If you have a paper recycling box right next to the trash can in your kitchen where you open mail, it takes no more effort to recycle your junk mail than to throw it out."

The final step in Warmingham's home recycling system is to have a central spot where all the recyclables from each area of the home can be collected — perhaps in a laundry room, a mudroom or the garage. This should be an area somewhere in the home between the living space and the car (for drop-off recyclables) or an outside door (for curbside pickup), and should contain bins large enough to hold all recyclables until pickup or drop-off.

If you don't have curbside pickup, Warmingham suggests establishing a regular drop-off schedule that fits the volume of recyclables you have. "If you have a lot of space and not a lot of recycling, you might get away with [dropping off recyclables] once a month or every other week." If not, schedule a regular day during the week to visit the recycling center.

Container Questions

What kinds of containers are best for recycling? According to the experts, homeowners can use just about anything effectively — plastic containers, cardboard boxes or even paper bags will all work fine. Warmingham leans toward

cardboard boxes, which are cheap (or even free), can be a fun decorating project for kids and are themselves recyclable. Reichman is a believer in plastic containers, which are easy to clean, long lasting and a bit more aesthetically pleasing than boxes or bags. Many containers are made of environmentally friendly recycled plastic.

Even small garbage cans can work well for the inside point-of-use recycling containers.

Reichman notes that many communities provide containers for their recycling programs, but you may need several different bins for the various materials unless your option is single-bin recycling (where different materials such as glass, plastic and cans can be combined in one bin). If you must use multi-bins, it's best to separate recyclables immediately rather than waiting to separate them on the day of pickup or drop-off, Reichman notes.

Warmingham cautions first-time recyclers to start slowly and simply. "If you have the option to recycle paper, and you have a huge amount of paper in your home, then first recycle paper," she advises. "Do that for a few weeks or a month until you build that habit. Then add something a little less voluminous."

One concern Warmingham has about people going green is "trying to do too much too quickly, or thinking that if they don't do everything, they might as well do nothing. Going green is not so much a destination as it is a process."

She also suggests checking back periodically with your municipality or recycling center, as recycling options can change from time to time. Homeowners should also review their personal recycling habits. Lifestyles, and therefore types of recyclables, can change materials.

How do you get the whole family involved in recycling? Warmingham thinks it's important for one member of the family to take the leadership role and make it her or his mission to educate and encourage the others. Each household member needs to be instructed on how the program is going to work. Bins should have labels listing what types of materials should go into them. If there are small children in your family, replace the labels with pictures, which the children can draw themselves. "Take the time to tell your family about [the recycling program] and revisit it from time to time," Warmingham adds.

Reichman recommends making a game of recycling to encourage children to participate, or perhaps organizing a neighborhood service project where children can collect recyclables from neighbors for pickup or drop-off, encouraging community awareness and effort.

Both experts we talked to agree that recycling is not just a nice thing to do, but also a vital part of being a responsible and concerned citizen. By taking advantage of their advice, you can make recycling a simple and routine activity in your home.

Paulette Dague has written for such publications as Custom Home, Kitchens/Baths and Log Home Living. She's based in Livingston, Texas.

This article is compliments of Smart HomeOwner Magazine, the Presenting Sponsor of our 2008 *Smart Home Owner Seminar Series* taking place throughout the weekend.