

Expanding the frontiers of recycling

DEAR MS. GREEN,

We recycle as much as possible, but sometimes we come across things that we'd like to recycle but aren't accepted at the recycling center in our community. Specifically, juice bags (like the ones we give out as drinks at my kids' soccer games), styro-foam packing peanuts, toothpaste tubes, and plastic utensils. Any ideas?

Waste-not in Wendell

DEAR WASTE-NOT,

Ms. Green loves this question, and to find the answers she consulted a wonderful article on the Real Simple magazine site called "How to Recycle Anything." This site confirmed that we have more options beyond those provided by our local recycling centers if we are committed enough to reducing trash in the landfills.

Ms. Green is very familiar with the juice bags you're talking about. She generally tries to avoid this type of packaging but she understands the peer and child pressure to provide these things at children's sporting events. Can she convince the masses of parents out there to simply bring a cooler with water and some paper cups? Or even suggest that people bring individual water bottles? Ms. Green never really understood why 6-year-olds needed anything more than half an orange after wandering about on the soccer field for 45 minutes, much less a pack of chocolate



Ask
Ms. Green

sandwich cookies and a full serving of corn syrup disguised as juice, but Ms. Green digresses. She is showing her crankiness. But she is also thankful that neither one of her children had the aptitude or passion for these kinds of sports!

To answer your question about juice bags (and boxes as well), because they are a combination of plastic and aluminum they cannot be recycled using conventional methods. But a company called Terracycle (terracycle.net) will recycle them into bags, totes, and other products for resale. Terracycle will even pay you a couple cents a bag for these items, so this could easily be incorporated into a school or sports team's fundraising efforts.

Styrofoam packing peanuts can be reused, of course, but in case you have too many or want them out of your house (Ms. Green has a not-so-amusing story of a small child (her own, sigh) who distributed 3 cubic feet of packing peanuts into her flower garden one summer day and so understands the impulse to get them out of one's house for good) you can donate

them to packaging stores for reuse (refer to loosefillpackaging.com to find a store near you) and you can even mail them to a reuse facility if one isn't within driving distance. You can also deflate the air pillows that companies have begun using and return them to Ameri-Pak's Sealed Air Recycle Center where they will recycle them for you.

Some toothpaste tubes are aluminum and can be recycled with cans. Plastic toothpaste tubes just have to be thrown away (alas) as do plastic utensils. At least for now. Hopefully new recycling opportunities – or perhaps better, recyclable packaging and materials – will be developed soon.

DEAR MS. GREEN,

Are there any video games out there that highlight "green" living? Seems like most are about killing things or building massive cities or going on fantasy adventures. I'd love to find a game that teaches about sustainability but that's also entertaining and stretching my students' problem solving skills.

Educator in Efland

DEAR EDUCATOR,

Yes! Plan It Green: The Big Switch, created by and produced by National Geographic, GE, and the Center for Science, "allows players to create their own virtual cities and attempt to transform

them into the most energy-efficient cities possible, earning points for energy production, eco-friendliness, and the happiness of the citizens of these digital domains. The free game aims to help young people better understand the energy systems available to us and what it takes to build a successful and sustainable community." (from treehugger.com)

I checked it out and while it's nowhere near as exciting as commercial games, it's entertaining enough for what it does. Definitely teaches about various alternative energies, recycling, and even energy credits, and it's practical: the first energy source you build is a coal-fired plant, because this is all you can afford and you haven't put money into alternative research. The first business you build is a factory, so your people can have jobs. Later, as you build up your bank account to fund research and to afford more expensive forms of energy you can slowly convert to a more sustainable way to run your city, provide more lucrative jobs, and balance consumer needs with those of the environment.

Ms. Green is Adrienne Bashista, co-owner of Home Performance NC, an energy auditing, energy rating, and home weatherization contracting company and a freelance writer/PR/marketing professional. Home Performance NC can be found on the web: www.homeperformancenc.com and by phone: 919.360.1570. You can contact Adrienne directly at adrienne@drtpress.com.

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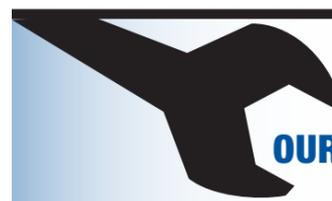
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