



The FOUR Rs: REVIEW, REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

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America: We have a waste problem. And we're not the only ones. People around the world generate 1.3 billion tons of trash per year. When it comes to protecting the environment and combating climate change, throwing things "away" has a significant impact after they are "out of sight, out of mind."

Producing, distributing, selling, and disposing of non-food goods like furniture, electronics, clothing, and housewares significantly contributes to our greenhouse gas emissions. According to the State of Massachusetts, about 23% of the average Massachusetts resident's carbon emissions comes from the stuff they buy.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO?

The most common point of entry for people to "go green" is to recycle. However, there's a reason it's the third "R" in Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: the recycling process itself is energy intensive and sometimes the return is not worth the effort, especially if it is not done properly (more on that in a moment).

Plus, every product has a limited lifespan. The same piece of paper or plastic can only be recycled two to three times before its quality degrades too much to be used again. But don't fret; there are plenty of small actions before you recycle that can make a big impact on this colossal problem.

REVISITING THE THREE RS

The Three Rs have been around for a while, but we propose a fourth (and first) "R": Review. Before you can make any kind of difference, you need to take stock of your own consumption. Spend a week observing the amount and types of waste your household is producing. Write down what is getting tossed, how much, and how often.

Next, Reduce

We live in a disposable age. While this may be more convenient, it also produces a lot of trash. Those plastic bags you use for everything? They are piling up in landfills or worse, winding up in the ocean and suffocating or being swallowed by turtles, birds, fish, dolphins, and whales.

In lieu of all those disposable goods, opt for more durable options, like travel mugs and cups, reusable zip-top bags, stainless steel or silicone straws, and cloth shopping bags. If you must buy something new, consider its entire lifespan, including the energy required to extract the materials and produce it, the resources used to package it, the fuel used to ship it around the world, and finally, its disposal. The longer you can use an item without replacing it, the better. Just because you can trade in your smartphone every year doesn't mean you should.

And don't forget about composting! Food scraps, egg shells, coffee grounds, tea bags, and paper towel and toilet paper rolls can all be turned into nutrient-rich compost. This is one of the best steps you can take to reduce landfill-caused greenhouse gas emissions. You can occasionally find used compost bins on Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace, but if composting on your own just isn't your thing, find out if your town has a compost pick-up or drop-off program or ask them to start one.

Then, Reuse

While the "Reduce" in the Three Rs means buying and throwing out less stuff in the first place, "Reuse" means finding a new use for old things. Before you throw anything away, ask yourself, "Is there something else I could use this for?" Old glass jars are great for storing nails and screws or office supplies. Milk and juice caps make great tokens for a variety of kids' games.

Instead of discarding unwanted clothes, household items, appliances, and more, try giving them to local churches, community centers, thrift stores, schools, and nonprofits. Consider purchasing your goods from these places as well.

Some companies have launched programs to reduce the number of new goods produced by offering to repair an item you purchased at low to no cost. Outdoor gear manufacturers like REI and Patagonia also sell gently used gear or products that were returned without the original packaging. In other instances, companies like Lush Cosmetics offer discounts and rewards to customers who return used containers to the business itself to be washed and reused.







If a company you love doesn't follow these practices, reach out to them and ask if they can work toward using less packaging or reducing their impact in other ways; companies want to please their customers, especially if it can help their own bottom line.

Lastly, Recycle

People who have good intentions of reducing their waste often try to recycle everything they use. So-called "aspirational recyclers" think, "If I put it in the recycling bin, someone will figure out what to do with it." Unfortunately, that can do more harm than good. If there is too much contamination (i.e. food residue or non-recyclable items mixed in), waste companies are often forced to send entire loads of recyclables to a landfill or incinerator.

To make matters worse, much of America's recycling was sent to China to be processed. However, last year, China announced it would no longer be accepting most "foreign garbage", leaving a lot of our recycling with nowhere to go but landfills. This makes it all the more important to reduce and reuse first, before recycling.

That being said, knowing and following your local town's recycling guidelines is the best way to ensure items are getting recycled more effectively. Some tips to avoid common errors:

-  **Wash out food containers** (sticky jelly jar—we're looking at you) before they go into the bin.
-  **Skip the greasy pizza boxes.** Typically, oil from the pizza seeps into the paper fibers, making them impossible to separate and properly recycle. But even the greasiest pizza box is perfectly compostable, once you tear it into smaller pieces.
-  **Trash the disposable paper cups.** Hot or cold, these are often lined with a waxy material that makes them impossible to recycle.
-  **Check the number on your plastics.** Look for a small triangle with a number in the center. Generally, the higher the number on the container, the less likely it is that American waste haulers will recycle it, but this varies, so check with your recycling center.
-  **Say no to plastic bags.** Most recycling facilities cannot accept plastic bags. By disposing of your recyclables in a plastic bag, you are creating another barrier to ensuring your items get recycled. Many grocery stores, however, take plastic bags as well as plastic film from packaging and packing materials. Visit plasticfilmrecycling.org to find a drop-off location near you.
-  **Keep it capped.** Loose plastic bottle caps and jar lids fall through recycling equipment and are swept into the trash. Put caps back on their bottles to ensure they're recycled. Pop-top caps that don't screw on are better saved for craft projects or thrown away.



YOUR FOUR Rs CHECKLIST

Here are a few ways to help you reduce the stuff you buy, reuse more, and recycle what is left.



Keep a box in your closet for clothing and accessories you no longer want. When it fills up, take it to a donation center, thrift shop, or online consignment store. Or get your friends together for a closet swap and trade for something new (or new-to-you, at least).



Donate worn, torn, or stained sheets, towels, and blankets to a local humane society or veterinary clinic.



Before you buy a brand-new appliance, search Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace to see if there is a perfectly good used option available locally and with minimal packaging.



Store a "to-go kit" in your car with travel mugs or cups for both hot and cold liquids, stainless steel or silicone straws, a set of reusable utensils (fork, spoon, and knife or even a multi-use "spork"), and cloth napkins or towels for cleaning up messes.



Stash a bag full of reusable shopping bags in the trunk of your car so they're there when you need them.



Find out if your town offers curbside pick-up or drop-off composting programs. They'll often provide you with a bin into which you can throw your food scraps and coffee grounds to be turned into nutrient-rich compost. If your town doesn't have a program, ask them to consider starting one.



Stock up on reusable snack and storage bags for meals on the go. Try out a bento box for school (or even grown-up) lunches.



Have an item your local recycling or donation center can't take? Find out where you can recycle or repurpose virtually any material (including torn or stained clothing) using the Recyclopedia directory at recyclesmartma.org.



For hard-to-recycle items like chip and snack bags, water filter cartridges, toothpaste tubes and toothbrushes, cosmetics packaging, and even guitar strings, visit terracycle.com to join one of their free mail-in or drop-off recycling programs.



Next to your regular recycling bin, keep a container for plastic film, including grocery, produce, newspaper, bread, and dry cleaning bags; disposable zip-top bags; bubble wrap and air pillows; and various kinds of product wrap. Your local grocery store likely accepts these items.



What are your tricks to reduce, reuse, and recycle? Send them to us at explore@massaudubon.org or share them in our brand-new Climate Action Group, hosted under our Facebook page!



We know that the trash problem can feel overwhelming, but by simply paying attention and following the four Rs—Review, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle—you can be part of the solution.