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## Recycling Quandary: What To Do About Labels on Plastic?



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Recycling should be simple. But it isn't. We have all stood in front of the recycling bin with an object in hand, confused about how to recycle it or if it's even recyclable at all. Most products are made from a variety of materials – and as often as not, plastic is among them. Some types of plastic packaging are recyclable. But can you still recycle them if they have labels on them? The short answer is, probably, but it depends. That's not very helpful, so let's look a bit more closely.

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## Labels and Recycling

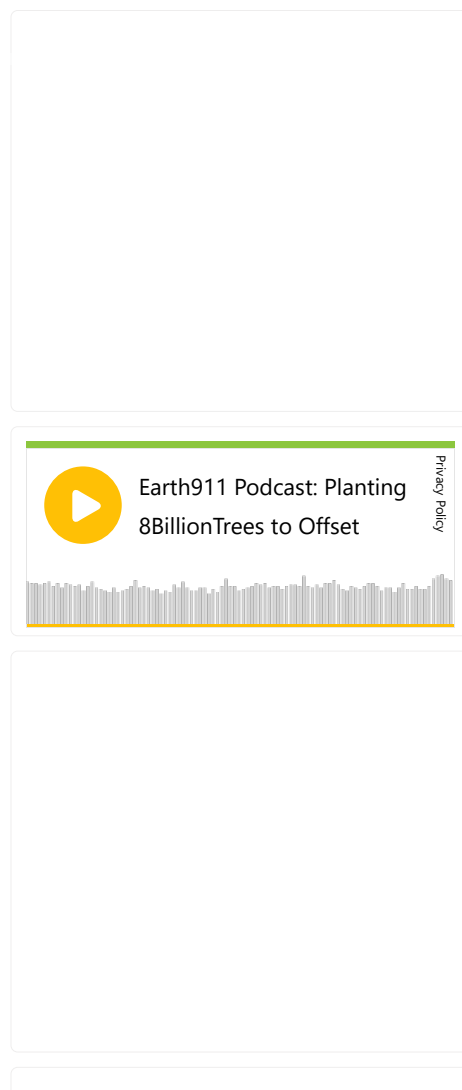
Different recycling facilities have different capabilities, and [different types of labels](#) may be more readily recyclable than others. When a recyclable plastic container has a label made of the same type of plastic, both are recyclable. When the label is made from paper or a different type of recyclable plastic it becomes a contaminant in the recycling process of the package.

However, most local recycling centers [do not require](#) that you remove labels from a product prior to tossing it in a recycling bin. Heat during the recycling process ensures that [paper labels, ink, and excess glue are burned away](#) from containers, whether they are cans, glass, or plastic bottles. If the label is made from a different type of plastic than the container, whether it is a recyclable type of plastic or not, it will contaminate the recycling. No process is perfect – some contamination is inevitable, and few plastic labels will not ruin a large load of recycling. But the amount of contamination has a lot to do with the quality and value of the recycled material, and even [whether there is a market](#) for it at all. So, while you probably don't have to remove labels, it's generally good practice to do so when you can.

## Plastic Containers

Of course, [reducing your plastic use](#) – especially [single-use plastics](#) – is better than recycling it. But living plastic-free is much easier said than done; sooner or later, you will find yourself trying to recycle plastic. The first thing to know is [it's a myth](#) that the recycling symbol always means a package is recyclable. The universal recycling symbol on plastic packaging always includes [resin identification codes](#) (RICs) – numbers that indicate the type of plastic from which the item is made. The most commonly recycled plastics are #1 and #2. [Plastic #5](#) is technically recyclable, but few curbside programs accept it.

Recyclable plastic containers may have glued-on paper labels. Because of the glue, these paper labels are not recyclable. If you can easily remove them, it can improve the quality of the recycled plastic, but it's usually not necessary to do so, because the paper and glue will burn off when the plastic is melted. Sometimes, a plastic bottle will be wrapped in a plastic film label. This label might be vinyl or polyethylene, both of which can be recycled – but not in your curbside bin.



You should remove plastic film labels from containers before recycling the container. In nearly all cases, the label itself should be disposed of as garbage.

## Plastic Bags

In rare cases, a plastic film label may be labeled as #2 or #4 plastic, in which case you can treat it like other plastic films, such as grocery bags (#2) and produce bags (#4). Curbside programs no longer commonly accept these materials. The [grocery store](#) is the most likely place to accept plastic bags for recycling. When you [recycle plastic film packaging](#), once again it is better to remove paper labels, but not absolutely necessary to do so.

## Specific and Changing

Plastic is popular because it can be formulated to meet so many different and highly specific material needs. But with so many variables, it's no surprise that municipalities have not developed a uniform way to deal with plastics. Changing commodities prices can force cities to change which materials they accept for recycling over time.

To be sure you neither waste a recyclable product nor contaminate a load of recyclables, the best course of action is to check with your local solid waste utility. They may contract with a private company to manage the recycling program. Check your utility bill and your city's website for contact information. Ask them what materials they accept and how carefully you need to prepare those materials for recycling. If your city does not accept a type of material, don't give up. You can use Earth911's [recycling database](#) to find a recycling company near you that accepts whatever you need to get rid of.

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