



Assessing Your Household Trash Management

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The goal of *Home•A•Syst* is to protect your health and the environment from pollutants in and around your home.

The following checklist is designed to help you pinpoint potential problem areas in your home that may affect the quality of the air you breathe and the water you drink. If a statement reflects the current situation in your household, check “Agree.” If the statement does not describe your household, check “Disagree.”

If you disagree with any of these statements, or if you are unsure, you may have a situation in your home that could affect the environment or your health. Refer to the fact section with the same number as that statement (under the heading, “What you should know about . . .”) for more information.

Don’t be alarmed if you disagreed with many or even all of these statements. That does not automatically mean you’re a major source of pollution! It may, however, tell you that a change in your habits can reduce your negative impact on the environment around

Agree **Disagree**

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 1. I buy only as much of a household product (paint, cleaners, etc.) as I need—I rarely have leftovers. |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 2. I recycle containers. |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 3. Most products I buy are made with recycled materials rather than new materials. |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 4. I consider durability, ease of repair, and potential for reuse when I buy products. |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 5. I compost yard and food wastes. |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 6. I never burn garbage on my property. |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | 7. I never dump household trash—especially hazardous household trash—on my land. |

you. In the same way, agreeing with every question doesn't mean that you should *not* consider ways to further minimize the amount of garbage you produce.

Why should you be concerned?

As the U.S. population increases, the amount of trash produced each year also increases. This is not only because of the greater number of people, but also because each person today throws away more than a typical person in the past. Studies estimate that in 1990 the average American produced around 4.3 pounds of waste each day, compared with 2.7 pounds in 1960. Surveys also found that most consumers are unaware of what and how much they throw away.

Most of our trash in this country ends up in landfills or incinerators. However, growing public concern about landfill location, combined with stricter disposal regulations nationwide, has made landfill space scarcer and more expensive. Environmental laws have forced many dumps and incinerators either to close or to modernize their facilities, costing taxpayers millions of dollars. In areas without disposal options nearby, consumers pay premium rates to have garbage hauled hundreds of miles to be buried or burned. But garbage is not merely an economic issue—it's an environmental one as well. Producing less waste, reusing, recycling, and composting not only save money but also protect air and water quality and the health of people and wildlife. The good news is that economic and environmental urgency has pushed Americans to find better ways to deal with their trash.

To minimize the effect you have on your air, water, and soil, your first goal should be to shop with the environment in mind so that you produce less waste. Second, consider reuse, recycling, and composting. Finally, dispose properly of the garbage you *do* produce.

For the purposes of this assessment, **trash** or **waste** refers to all the unwanted material you produce in your household. **Garbage** is what is left after you reuse, recycle, or compost—that is, garbage is what actually goes to the landfill or gets burned. **Hazardous** products are defined as products that can cause injury or illness during normal handling and use, and which require special consideration for disposal.

Home•A•Syst is only for your own use and benefit. It is a voluntary program intended to provide general information about protecting your health and the environment. Information from a *Home•A•Syst* assessment will not be collected by Extension or any other outside agency and should remain in your private records.

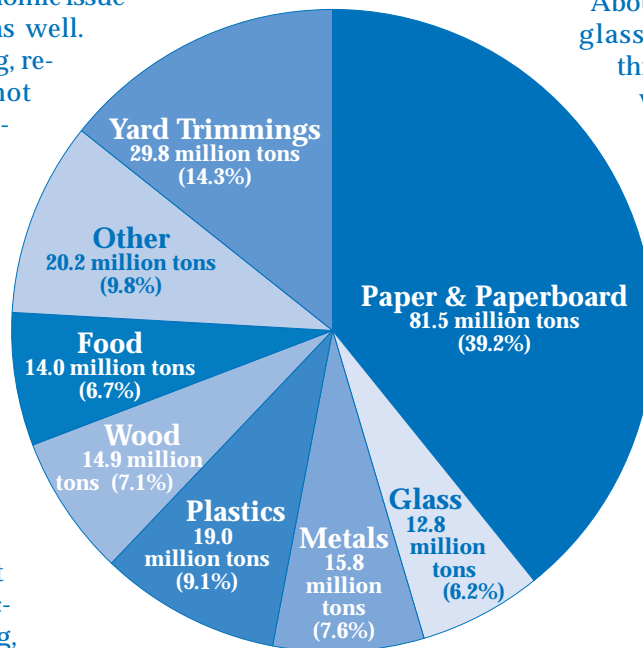
What you should know about. . . .

1. Enviro-shopping

If you don't produce trash, you won't need to get rid of it. But since everyone generates at least some trash, it's important to consider ways to keep it to a minimum.

About a third of the paper, plastic, glass, cardboard, and metal we throw away in America (where we produce more trash per person than any other country in the world) comes from packaging. While some packaging serves a useful purpose, much is unnecessary. This wastes natural resources and crowds our landfills. Choose products with minimal wrapping (as long as safety is ensured), and write or call product manufacturers to let them know about your preference for less packaging.

Purchasing decisions that you make every day determine the type and volume of waste that you will someday



Solid Waste in U.S. Landfills

discard. However, if you buy *with the environment in mind*—that is, if you use your purchasing power to minimize your impact on the environment—you can select products that generate less waste. This is called **enviro-shopping**, or **precycling**.

Enviro-shopping means buying only what you need. A good price or a bulk package may tempt you to buy products in large amounts. But if you don't use all of the product, not only have you wasted money, but you end up throwing away the leftovers. Make sure you can use what you buy, or give the leftovers to someone who can use them.

Enviro-shopping also means buying products that are recyclable or are made from recycled materials, that are durable, or that can be reused.

2. Recycling

Many product containers and packaging materials are potentially recyclable, such as glass bottles, plastic bags, aluminum cans, tin cans, and cardboard boxes. Paper products such as newspapers, magazines, and some gift wraps should also be recycled. To promote recycling, many manufacturers use the international recyclable-material symbol:



However, the symbol only means that the product is made from materials that are *suitable* for recycling *if* your local recycling program will take them. If the product cannot be recycled locally, then the product, for all practical purposes, is not really recyclable. If you can't recycle locally, you may be able to take some of your recyclables to a neighboring community that accepts them.

The list of materials that your local program accepts is likely to change over time, so be sure to keep yourself up-to-date.

Recycling, however, is not limited to typical grocery-store-purchased items like aluminum cans, cardboard, and glass bottles. There may be local scrap dealers or industrial salvage yards that want your broken appliances, junk vehicles, wood wastes, metal scraps, old doors and windows, and so on. Check in your local Yellow Pages for possibilities.

3. Products made from recycled materials

A surprising variety of products is now made from recycled materials—everything from carpet to salad-dressing bottles. However, once materials are recycled, they will be made into new products or packaging *only* if there is a market for them. As a consumer, you can use your buying power to support products made from recycled materials. When you recycle *and* buy recycled products, you ensure that materials are cycled again and again, a process known as “closing the loop.”

On product packaging, look for the words “made from recycled materials,” or, especially, for “made from **post-consumer** recycled materials.” This means that all or part of the packaging is made from materials that have been recycled by consumers in community recycling programs. Sometimes these words are replaced by the recyclable-material symbol against a black background:



4. Product durability and reuse

Part of the enviro-shopping concept is evaluating your purchases for their ability to last, because of their sturdiness or ability to be reused. Although recycling is far better than throwing something away, it still requires energy and resources and produces waste and pollution. For example, empty glass bottles must be collected, sorted, crushed, trucked to a glass factory, washed, melted, and re-formed into new bottles. Refillable glass beverage bottles, on the other hand, can simply be collected and trucked back to the bottler, where they are washed and refilled. So it's always best to reuse a product when possible.

Choose products that last. For example, compact fluorescent light bulbs last ten times as long as ordinary bulbs. They are initially more expensive, but in the long run cost much less to operate. Look for products that can be fixed when broken. Children's toys that are held together with screws often can be more easily taken apart and repaired than toys that are glued.

Long-lasting products make good hand-me-downs. Share old clothes and furniture or donate usable items to programs like Goodwill or the Salvation Army. Hold a yard sale to eliminate unwanted possessions *and* make a little money. Be creative—you can usually find uses for more materials than you realize. Give your packaging foam peanuts to a local gift shop or mailing service, give cardboard boxes to someone who is moving out of his or her home. See if neighbors can use your excess paint, lumber, or empty plastic pails. Your local high school's shop class may need your wood scraps. Post materials you have available on a community bulletin board or online want-ad site.

5. Composting

Yard and food wastes typically make up 10 percent to 25 percent of all garbage in landfills. Many landfill facilities across the country have banned some food and yard wastes from disposal not only because of the tremendous volume it occupies, but because it contributes to odor problems and groundwater contamination.

Composting turns organic waste into useful, high-quality fertilizer by the natural process of decomposition. Your home's amount of yard and food wastes depends on your eating and gardening habits, the size of your yard, and the region you live in, but composting these wastes is always an environmentally responsible alternative to sending them to the landfill. You don't even necessarily have to do it yourself—many communities have established yard-waste compost programs with convenient drop-off sites for your waste or even curbside pickup.

Making your own compost is easy. You can buy a recycling bin at most hardware stores or garden centers, or you can build your own. Ingredients in the **compost pile** can include leaves, grass clippings, plant trimmings, straw, kitchen scraps (but not animal wastes like fat or bones), manure (but not pet wastes), and paper. In a few months, microbes, earthworms, and fungi will have turned the pile into a dark brown, crumbly compost that can be spread on lawns or mixed with garden soil as an excellent natural fertilizer. You can even compost kitchen vegetable wastes *indoors* with a box of worms! This method, believe it or not, is clean, efficient, and practically odorless. For more information on composting, contact your local Extension office or read Extension publication PB1479, *Composting Yard, Garden and Food Waste at Home*.

6. Garbage incineration

Many rural residents use burn barrels to get rid

of household wastes. But when paper, plastics, printing inks, batteries, and other common materials are burned, a noxious mixture of chemicals is released into the air. These chemicals can include arsenic, benzene, carbon monoxide, formaldehyde, hydrochloric acid, lead, mercury, and sulfuric acid, all of which are harmful to human health when breathed or ingested. Because of this, most state and local governments have passed laws to restrict what you can burn; in some areas, especially urban and suburban settings, open burning is banned altogether.

Most by-products of burning are removed from the air by rain or snow and are then deposited on land or water. The ash residue from burning also poses a problem; it too contains heavy metals and other toxic substances. If the ash is dumped on your property, it can contaminate your soil and, eventually, your groundwater. Contact your local law enforcement agency, fire department, or health department for information on burning restrictions that apply to your property. Consider other alternatives for disposal of your trash.

7. Dumping household garbage

Garbage dumped on your property is not only unsightly, but may also contain harmful chemicals that can **leach** (move *with water* down through the soil) to groundwater. If you have a well, this can pose a serious threat to your drinking-water supply. Harmful chemicals in garbage can also be spread by wind and rain. Even small amounts of these chemicals can cause serious groundwater contamination.

Hazardous products are the source of harmful chemicals in your garbage. Labels on hazardous products (which can be toxic, corrosive, reactive, flammable, explosive, or radioactive) read *Caution*, *Warning*, or *Danger-Poison*, depending on the degree of the hazard. Chances are, many products you use in your home can be considered hazardous, even though you may not think they're dangerous to your health. Such products include paints, oils, solvents, cleaners, nail polish and remover, batteries, and pesticides. Try to use up these kinds of products completely, or share them with neighbors. Some, like used motor oil, can be recycled (call your local service station or municipal, county, or state government for more information). When appropriate, recycle containers as well.

Some hazardous wastes can be thrown in the trash *after special treatment*. Paint, shoe polish, and nail polish can be thrown in the trash after they have been evaporated. Leave these products out in a well-venti-

lated area until they are hardened and dry; then wrap them in newspaper and place them in the trash. When these products are in solid form, they are less likely to mix with other chemicals or leak into the water supply. Still, it is never a good idea to dump them on your property.

Especially on properties served by street drains and storm sewers, any garbage exposed to the weather—including pet wastes—can wash directly into lakes and streams. Storm sewers are rarely connected to wastewater treatment facilities. Some materials, like foam peanuts and other plastic debris, can be transported by storm runoff to open water, where they may be mistaken for food and eaten by fish or birds. Discarded tires provide a haven for mosquitoes. For information on disposing of hazardous garbage, contact your local Extension office or health department, or the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, Division of Solid Waste, at (615)532-0780.

Make a note:

The table on page 6 of SP508M, *Assessing Your Homesite*, provides a space for you to list all the problem areas in your home that you find while completing *Home•A•Syst*. Take a few minutes now to list any household-trash problems you discovered as you completed *Assessing Your Household Trash Management*. Later, when you complete *Assessing Your Homesite*, you will include these items on the map you draw of your property. Potential items from this factsheet include:

- burn sites
- dump sites

Remember:

- Shop with the environment in mind—purchase items that will produce the least trash.
- Buy only what you need.
- Give leftovers to someone else.
- Buy products that are recyclable or are made from recycled material.
- Choose items that are durable or that can be reused.
- Check with local scrap dealers or high school shop classes before disposing of old appliances, scrap metal, or lumber.
- Compost yard and food wastes.
- Donate old clothes and furniture to programs like Goodwill or the Salvation Army.
- Use a community bulletin board or online site to post a list of materials you want to get rid of.
- Don't burn or dump hazardous waste on your property.
- Check with your local law enforcement agency about burning and dumping restrictions in your community.

If you want more information:

Contact:

- Your local Extension office
- Your local health department or law enforcement agency
- Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation
Division of Solid Waste
401 Church Street
L&C Tower, 5th Floor
Nashville, TN 37243-1535
(615)532-0780

Read:

- *Composting Yard, Garden and Food Waste at Home.* PB 1479.
- *Recycling Guide.* PB 1447.
- *Household Chemicals: Alternatives and Precautions.* SP 365-A.
- *Hazardous Household Products.* SP 365-B.
- *Disposing of Hazardous Household Products.* SP 365-C.

The above publications are available from your University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service county office.

Download:

- <http://funnelweb.utcc.utk.edu/~utext/>
The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service home page.
- <http://www.epa.gov/recyclecity>
The EPA's educational recycling site for kids.
- <http://www.logicnet.com/cathy.kitlar/world.htm>
Site recommended by the search engine Infoseek with links to information about recycling, composting, lead poisoning, ozone, acid rain, and more.
- <http://www.ncg.nrcs.usda.gov/public.html>
The Natural Resources Conservation Service home page. See section entitled, "Public Service Information," for information on household trash management and other topics.
- <http://www.cals.cornell.edu/dept/compost>
Cornell University's composting site—includes information for teachers to use in the classroom and a "weird and unusual composting" section.
- <http://www.oldgrowth.org/compost>
Excellent resource with lots of information about worm composting.
- <http://www.webdirectory.com>
Comprehensive environmental search engine/bulletin board—a great way to find information about any environmental topic.

This *Home•A•Syst* assessment does not cover all potential health or environmental risks related to household waste disposal. It is meant to be a starting point for identifying and addressing the most apparent risks.

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