

Garbage Gone but not Forgotten



Most of our garbage is sent to landfills, dumps or municipal incinerators. But with more and more people producing more and more waste, landfills are filling up faster than we can find new sites for them.

Decomposing garbage also produces two greenhouse gases: carbon dioxide and methane, an invisible, odourless, and highly flammable gas. At some big landfill sites in Canada, methane is now being collected and burned to produce energy.

Water and oxygen are required to break down garbage. But water and oxygen are in short supply deep in a landfill, so decomposition takes place very slowly. In fact, when researchers cored down into one landfill, they discovered newspapers over 30 years old still in readable condition!

Incinerations are sometimes used to burn solid waste under controlled conditions. They reduce the stress on landfills, but create other environmental problems. The ashes must be disposed of, either at a landfill, or, if they are toxic, at a hazardous waste facility. Burning garbage also produces acid gases, carbon dioxide and toxic chemicals that must be treated with expensive air pollution control equipment to avoid contributing to acid rain, ozone depletion and air pollution.

Recycling is just one way to reduce waste. To be really effective, we have to incorporate the 4Rs - *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Recover* – into our daily routine.

Reducing the amount of waste we produce is by far the most effective way to battle the flow of garbage into the landfill. Packaging makes up about half our garbage by volume, one-third by weight.

- When you shop, try to find products that have little or no packaging.

What we cannot reduce we should try to reuse. □

- Repair rather than buying a new.
- Use jars, tins and plastic containers to store leftovers, bulk foods and household items.
- Buy durable, good quality products that will last.

Materials and packaging that cannot be reused should be recycled at home, work and school. You can contribute to recycling by purchasing recycled and recyclable products.

- At the store, ask yourself: Can this product or its packaging be reused or recycled? Was it produced from recycled materials? Whenever possible, choose products that meet these criteria.

Finally, recover energy from waste that cannot be used for something else. This fourth R is difficult to put into practice at home, and is geared more towards industry.

Did you know?

- Landfill sites account for about 38% of Canada's total methane emissions. Methane is 20 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.
- 17 million Canadians (nearly 2/3 of us) have access to recycling.

SOME TIME IN THE DISTANT FUTURE, AN ARCHAEOLOGIST LOOKING BACK AT LATE 20TH CENTURY CANADA WILL MARVEL AT WHAT A WASTEFUL SOCIETY WE WERE. DIGGING AROUND IN OUR LANDFILL SITES, SHE WILL CORRECTLY ESTIMATE THAT IN THE 1990S, EACH CANADIAN THREW AWAY ABOUT ONE TON OF WASTE MATERIALS EVERY YEAR!

THINK BACK THROUGH YOUR DAY: THE EMPTY TOOTHPASTE TUBE, THE CEREAL BOX, AND THE POP CAN IN YOUR LUNCH, YOUR GUM WRAPPER, AND THE FOOD YOU LEFT ON YOUR PLATE AT DINNER. NATURAL RESOURCES SUCH AS WATER, WOOD AND FOSSIL FUELS GO INTO THE PRODUCTION AND TRANSPORTATION OF ALL THESE THINGS. WHEN WE THROW THEM AWAY, WE ARE THROWING AWAY OUR VALUABLE RESOURCES. NO WONDER THE ARCHAEOLOGIST OF THE FUTURE FINDS US WASTEFUL!

- About 1/3 of our waste is paper and paperboard. Another third is yard and kitchen waste. The rest is divided among glass, metals, plastics, textiles, wood and other materials.
- Avoid food packaged in individual servings. Buy in bulk. It saves money and the environment.
- Buy multi-use items rather than single-use when possible.
- Use your own cloth bags for shopping.
- Donate your old clothes to charity.
- Buy beverages in refillable containers.
- Use rechargeable batteries.
- Share your newspaper, magazines and books with a friend.
- Wrap presents in reusable cloth bags or reused wrapping paper.
- Rent items you use infrequently.
- Compost!
- Pack your lunch in reusable containers.
- Support your community's recycling programs.
- Buy products that contain recycled materials.
- Use both sides of every sheet of paper.
- Use a durable refillable mug or glass at school or work.
- Encourage your friends and family to follow your good example.

Fact: If we all work at reducing our own wastes, together we will make a BIG difference.

Be creative. There are many more ways we can reduce the waste material we produce.

Inspired and adapted from www.atl.ec.gc.ca/udo/reuse.html



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