

Why Keep Loudoun Beautiful Recycles at Litter Cleanups, and You Should, too!

The Changing Litter Landscape

Since 1972, Keep Loudoun Beautiful (KLB) has been keeping Loudoun County beautiful through annual litter cleanups, illegal trash dumpsite monitoring, roadside beautification projects, public school environmental educational programs, and environmental awareness campaigns for Loudoun citizens. Over these many decades of service, KLB has seen the litter landscape change. In the early days, illegal dumping was running rampant with all the open spaces. In the new millennium, illegal dumping is still an issue, but most litter polluting our county is directly related to development and modern society's use-and-toss lifestyles, where disposable things, like bottled water and disposable plastic shopping bags are the norm instead of their environmentally-sustainable reusable counterparts.

So in addition to the massive amounts of unnecessarily wasted energy and natural resources, all these disposable things have become a huge litter problem, not only from deliberate littering, but equally from careless littering. The biggest contributor to careless littering is the proliferation and continued use of open-top curbside recycling totes. When these totes were introduced decades ago, most recycling was bundled newspapers, glass, and tin cans, which had some weight to them. These days, most household recycling is very lightweight plastic or aluminum. The light weight and large surface area of these items, in addition to the typical overfilled recycling tote, creates a setting ripe for being very susceptible to windy conditions, which coincidentally seems to occur between setout and pickup of the recycling. These high winds, from winter storms, thunderstorms, and other weather patterns, blow the lightweight recycling out onto the street, where unless picked-up soon afterwards, will eventually find the nearest storm drain or ditch, which leads to the nearest stream, and so on out to the closest ocean, contributing to the 5 major ocean litter gyres. And until humans figure out that it's smarter to reuse AND outlaw open-top recycling totes, our litter epidemic will continue to grow as the population grows.

Typical Litter Components

Given the "perfect litter storm" described above, it's no surprise that more than half of the litter that is polluting our communities and planet can be recycled. The photos below shows typical roadside litter, collected during a casual neighborhood walk, on the left, and the remaining trash once the recycling has been removed, on the right.



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Here's the breakdown of what can be recycled with the litter cleanup example above:

Aluminum cans: 30	Plastic bottles/cups: 16
Glass bottles: 2	Plastic bags: 8

So that leaves just 12 items that would not be acceptable by most curbside or municipal recycling, noting that the large plastic bag is made of a recyclable material, but it is too soiled for processing, and the Styrofoam cups, while deceptively showing a recycling symbol, are not accepted at most recycling centers due to the machinery-clogging nature of this material (and why you should always try to avoid Styrofoam).

A quick percentage calculation reveals that the 56 recycling items represent **82.35%** of the litter collected...well more than half!

So Why Recycle?

Okay, the litter breakdown and percentages are interesting, but you might be wondering why it's so important to go the extra mile to recycle instead of just tossing everything into the same trash bag destined for the landfill.

It's all in the value! Recycling something, among many other benefits, consumes less energy and natural resources than starting with raw materials. The aluminum cans in the example above represents almost 4 days of TV power or almost 2 gallons of gasoline saved...all from just 30 cans! The two glass bottles can light a 100-watt light bulb for 8 hours or run a computer for an hour, and recycling the plastic bottles and bags can save enough energy to power a 60-watt light bulb for 4 days. That's a big deal with just 56 items, so now imagine what would be saved if we all recycled what we could while beautifying our communities and planet? Think about all the energy & natural resources that would be saved for us and future generations.

As shown above, the value of recycling to us humans is well documented and clear, so doesn't it make sense to make a reasonable effort to responsibly dispose of litter that can be recycled by recycling it? ***Keep Loudoun Beautiful thinks so!***

How to Incorporate Recycling Into Your Cleanup

Alright, you say you get it and want to recycle what you can at your cleanup, but how?

The first thing to remember is that Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) will sadly NOT recycle anything. So that means you cannot leave any recycling roadside for a VDOT pickup, no matter what the bag color is. If your cleanup is not in Virginia and your DOT does the responsible thing by recycling, then that's not only good for you, it's great for all of us!

Acceptable commingled recycling by most curbside or municipal recycling consists of glass, plastic, metal, and paper/cardboard, which is the typical household stuff we use every day. "Commingled" means that you don't have to pre-sort these items, which makes it as easy as possible to recycle, but it's always a good idea to verify the materials and plastic recycling codes that are accepted at your recycling destination. Except for disposable plastic bags and wrap, which should be clean and dry for recycling, it doesn't matter how soiled the commingled recycling is. It still can be recycled. KLB provides translucent blue bags (purchased at The Home Depot - Store

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SKU # 713286) for keeping the recycling separate from trash in the orange VDOT bags. Disposable plastic bags and wraps, if reasonably clean and dry, can be recycled at your nearest grocery store, Target, and Wal-Mart. KLB provides clear bags to collect this plastic wrap and bags, but really any trash bag or disposable shopping bag you find stuck in a bush or tree will work.

Depending on your cleanup style and the amount of litter anticipated, here are some practical suggestions:

1. If the overall litter amount isn't too overwhelming, you could collect everything in common bags. When done, dump everything out and separate the recycling from the trash. That's what was done in the litter collection example above, and makes for great photo opportunities. It really doesn't take that much extra time to do this and makes the collection easier, but you need to transport all litter to your destination for processing.
2. You could collect and put the trash and recycling in separate bags as described above. The advantage is that the trash can be left roadside, but the recycling still needs to go home with you or to the nearest municipal recycling center. Working in teams, while always recommended, is helpful here as team members can be in charge of certain bags types. Plus, if you empty the residual contents of cans and bottles and then crush them, the weight and volume of the recycling bags can be significantly reduced.
3. If the two suggestions above are not practical due to the amount of litter collected, then as a last resort, you could make prior arrangements with the organization you're representing, like KLB, to schedule a post-cleanup recycling sweep by a partner trash hauler or by the organization before VDOT is notified.

Typically, you will fill two or more blue recycling bags for every orange bag, and only one clear bag is usually needed per team since the plastic wraps and bags usually don't take up that much space, unless you find large industrial sheets floating around. If the blue bags are in decent shape, please empty the contents into your covered recycling bin for curbside recycling or dump into a municipal recycling bin so you can reuse the bags for the next cleanup.

If you have any questions or would like to share your litter recycling tips, please contact KLB at info@KeepLoudounBeautiful.org.

**Thank you for cleaning-up your community
and for making recycling a priority!**