



# THE TRUTH ABOUT PLASTIC RECYCLING

Recapping a recent public radio/television investigation

by Tracy Frisch, Environment Committee

On Sept. 11, 2020, a major exposé broadcast on NPR's *Planet Money* and PBS's *Frontline* revealed a decades-long scheme by Big Oil to convince the public that plastic was not a problem alleging that most of it could and would be recycled. In fact, according to [US EPA data](#), less than 10 percent of all plastics has ever been recycled.

*In 2017, landfills accumulated 26.8 million tons of plastic, accounting for 19.2% of all municipal solid waste received.*

To investigate corporate deception, NPR and PBS reporters reviewed internal industry documents donated to university archives by former executives and interviewed former industry officials.

The story begins with a crisis, but it wasn't an environmental crisis that got the attention of the major oil corporations. Instead it was an image problem that executives feared would threaten their bottom line. As plastics in our everyday lives became more and more ubiquitous, some became increasingly alarmed about what happened to discarded plastic; environmental groups and elected officials worked to regulate the industry.

Executives from large oil companies fought back with a major public relations campaign. In the 1990s, companies including Exxon, Chevron, Dow, and DuPont ran a \$50 million annual ad campaign touting the wonders of plastic and telling consumers to recycle it.

*Repeat a message often enough and people internalize it as the truth.*

This PR cost was a drop in the bucket for an industry currently making \$400 billion annually from new plastic production.

All the while, the industry apparently knew from internal reports that wide-scale recycling of the amount and types of plastic it was producing was unlikely. Not only is plastic recycling cost-prohibitive but the very nature of plastic makes recycling it impractical, perhaps even unfeasible. Ac-

ording to a 1973 scientific report commissioned by the oil industry, NPR reported that "a degradation of resin properties and performance occurs during the initial fabrication, through aging, and in any recclamation process."

## Reasons why plastic isn't recycled:

- Collecting and sorting used plastic containers is expensive, especially given the proliferation of different types of plastic; and these different types cannot be melted down together, which is the first step in the recycling process.

- Reprocessing used plastic to make recycled plastic degrades quality, preventing plastic from being recycled more than once or twice. Metal, on the other hand, can be recycled repeatedly.

- Making new plastic is almost always less expensive than recycling plastic.

Larry Thomas, a former president of the Society of the Plastics Industry, a powerful DC trade group now known as the Plastics Industry Association, explained to NPR that the oil industry undertook the PR campaign because "if the public thinks that recycling is working, then they are not going to be as concerned about the environment."

Lew Freeman, a former colleague of Thomas's, expanded on the statement, telling NPR that this "advertising was motivated first and foremost by legislation and other initiatives...being introduced in state legislatures and sometimes in Congress to ban or curb the use of plastics because of its performance in the waste stream."

These plastic-promoting commercials had a dampening effect on recycling. The exposé reported how the PR campaign affected one small San Diego recycling facility in the early 1990s. Customers of a recycling business owned by Coy Smith saw ads and asked to recycle plastic, so Smith found a market and began accept-

ing soda bottles and milk jugs. That was manageable, even though Smith lost money on these items, because he was able to subsidize his losses by selling paper, aluminum, and steel for recycling.

When the industry started stamping the triangular arrow logo on the bottom of containers to signify recyclability, Smith's customers responded by placing all kinds of plastic containers in their bins. They wanted to recycle and thought they were helping. Instead, they were filling their bins with contaminated materials that could not be recycled and that, in effect, constituted trash to be disposed of.



**EVER WONDER** why that universal recycling symbol appears on most plastic? It is the result of the plastic industry's lobbying effort in nearly 40

states to mandate the symbol on all plastic. It sought to make all plastic seem recyclable. [According to NPR](#), a 1993 Society of the Plastics Industry report informed trade group officials that the symbol was being misused. Such greenwashing continues to this day. [Editors' note: [Greenwashing](#) is the process of conveying a false impression or providing misleading information about how a company's products are more environmentally sound.]

The oil industry didn't seek to influence the public—and public officials—only by running feel-good commercials about plastic. It also funded projects to create the illusion that plastic recycling was ongoing. NPR investigators learned what happened to 10 or 11 projects that the industry began publicizing in 1989. Not one of these initiatives survived past the mid-1990s. A plan to recycle plastic in all national parks (now numbering over 420) was implemented in just 7 parks before it was discontinued. Other such projects lasted only a couple of years. These attempts to promote plastic recycling faltered because they didn't make economic sense; yet this lesson had no effect on industry messaging.

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## Discovering Black Gold Making the Most of Compost

by Lynn Huntington

Even after a hard frost you can capture every bit of goodness that your garden still has to offer through composting. Composting will give you a healthy start to future gardens and keep all of your spent plants out of the landfill.

There are many different ways to create a compost pile, from simple to elaborate. Several methods are at work in our household gardens, but we favor simplicity. We have the space to just make a pile at the edge of the property and add to it. In a perfect scenario the pile should be turned to help generate the heat needed to break down weed seeds. We have never had the time to devote to that task so we just have a very large layer cake of compost and time does the rest...compost happens.

The pile is made up of leaves, grass clippings, vegetable kitchen scraps, coffee grinds, tea bags, weeds, and spent plants. When we add kitchen scraps we toss some grass clippings, leaves, or snow on top depending on the time of year. The pile you make should be at least three feet tall and

three feet wide and should include green things like grass, weeds and garden plants, and some brown things such as leaves or straw. You can even add a little soil if you are digging for a new plant or tree.



Summer squash vines sprout from the author's compost pile.

Other methods include wire bins, compost tumblers (see top left photo), and even worm composting (vermiculture) inside the house. We use all of these methods plus a bin made from recycled tires that sits right inside one of the gardens.

Compost should not smell or draw animals. If the pile does create an unpleasant odor, the best remedy is to add more brown material like leaves or straw and give it more air by inserting a hollow tube into the pile. Be sure not to add meat or dairy to your pile, as these can create bad odors and possibly draw animals to the pile.

When you add that rich brown compost to your future gardens you are adding micronutrients, developing soil fertility, improving soil structure, and increasing water retention. My earliest garden mentor told me to feed the soil and then let the soil feed the plants.

Convinced? When you're ready to start, a bale of straw and all of the plants and leaves coming out of your garden are all you will need to begin, and then you can add kitchen scraps as they are available.

In addition to adding about 15 yards of compost to all our gardens this year, we had an added benefit. We were unable to purchase the seed for a favorite summer squash this year and our

saved seed failed, but our compost pile provided a bounty of Zucchini rampicante!



Zucchini Rampicante Squash

A leisurely collapsing of the thing into its possibilities—both bean and hollyhock, potato, zinnia, squash! the opulence of everything that rots.

—from "Compost: An Ode" by Andrew Hudgins

## PLASTIC RECYCLING

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# BIG OIL

Big Oil is currently amidst a major investment binge to expand its plastic production capacity. As consumer demand for oil continues to decrease, the industry is seeking profits elsewhere. New chemical plants are being constructed to make plastic. But the oil industry is bringing back its discredited playbook, claiming that it will do better this time around now that we have new technologies and a greater ability to recycle all that plastic. New advertising has begun to air. Will we buy their claims anew?

Larry Thomas, the former plastic industry executive, knows better. "Nobody that is producing a virgin product wants something

to come along that is going to replace it," he told NPR reporters. "Produce more virgin material—that's their business."

For more information, or to become active, visit <https://beyondplastics.org>.

### Implications for customers:

**1.** As a shopper, be mindful about purchasing products packaged in plastic containers. In some cases, you have a choice. (For instance, you can buy nut butters and coconut oil in either glass or plastic jars. You can bring in glass jars from home to buy nuts and trail mix in bulk or you can buy them prepackaged by Honest Weight.)

**2.** To voice concerns about products packaged at the Co-op, contact the department manager via the [Contact](#) tab on the HWFC website or submit comments to the HWFC Suggestion Box at the Service Desk.

"The very nature of plastic makes recycling impractical, perhaps even unfeasible."

**3.** For products that you believe may be questionably packaged by a vendor, contact that company directly and explain that you will not buy its product when packaged in a plastic container.

**4.** Bring your own washed and sanitized glass or metal containers for shopping in the Bulk Department. Don't forget to stop at the Service Desk to get each one weighed so you have the tare [net container weight] for checkout.

**5.** In the coming months, the Environment Committee will turn its attention to packaging at Honest Weight Food Co-op. If you want to get involved, contact [Environment-Comm@honestweight.coop](mailto:Environment-Comm@honestweight.coop). You can read the full NPR article [here](#).