

## Plastics and Recycling

It seems like we're being over run with plastics. Plastic shopping bags, bread bags, produce bags, plastic sucker sticks, plastic food containers, plastic toys, furniture, cars, carpet, clothes, shoes, pillows, mattresses, screws, shelves, bikes, games, utensils, phones, computers. Plastics, plastics, everywhere. Sure, plastic is cheap, versatile and tough.

Plastics seem to be everywhere and there are benefits to using plastics. Plastic bags for instance, even if they are not recycled take up less space in a landfill, and take less energy and resources to manufacture than paper bags. And plastic food storage containers and packaging keep out contaminants and protect food during transport. But recycling efforts haven't really become mainstream in the US or in many European countries. What is the environmental impact of recycling plastics?

The biggest problem with recycling plastics is that there are several different kinds. Each kind has different recycling processes. Therefore, there is an issue of sorting. In most western countries (US and Europe) the consumer does the sorting. That means you and me. Secondly, when the municipal waste system implements a recycling program they usually send out a second truck to pick up the recyclables – increasing air pollution emissions.

Recycling plastics requires vast amounts of water, electricity, and transportation. But does it require more than creating plastics from raw materials? Plastics are made from natural gas, about 70%. By recycling plastics we can save the natural gas for other uses.

The [www.preserveproducts.com](http://www.preserveproducts.com) website touts these numbers for their recycled plastics vs virgin polypropylene (or fresh plastic from raw materials):

- At least 54% less water
- At least 64% less greenhouse gas emissions
- At least 75% less oil
- At least 48% less coal
- At least 77% less natural gas
- At least 46% less electricity

Those numbers look pretty good.

Reducing the amount of plastic we use and purchase is a good practice. Searching out and purchasing items made from recycled plastics is another. Is it too much to ask of people to sort their own plastics? How can more people be encouraged to recycle their plastics?