

# A Researcher's Guide to Mixed Recycling

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## What is mixed recycling?

Mixed recycling is primarily intended for **everyday items such as single-use glassware and plastics used in food and beverage packaging**. There are small bins around the building, as well as large dumpsters located at some loading docks where acceptable items may be recycled.

## Why is proper recycling important?

There is a disproportionate amount of recycling contamination originating from the UW medical centers. **Small objects, oil/food residues, and plastic bags** are all common sources of contamination, some of which can even damage sorting equipment. We all want to do the right thing, and by getting a better handle on the rules, we can send fewer items to the landfill.



## “When in doubt, throw it out!”

As far as lab items go, most of it is unfortunately destined for the landfill. However, in matters of recycling, we should not think of the garbage as our enemy. Throwing away one bag of small plastics instead of putting it in the mixed recycling dumpster could prevent an entire truckload of actual recyclable materials from getting contaminated and thrown in the landfill anyway.

## The 3 inch rule

When recycling is taken to the sorting facility, the load passes over a grate with 3 inch square holes. This is meant to filter broken glass to a catchment tray below, and allow plastics to move on to the next round of sorting. If small, non-glass objects fall through to the glass area, it contaminates the entire load of glass.

**Common lab items that MUST be thrown in the garbage:**

- pipette tips
- tube racks
- micro-centrifuge tubes
- container lids
- anything that could easily shatter into small pieces during sorting



### BOTTLES & CANS



### CARTONS & CONTAINERS



## Glass

**NO LAB GLASSWARE CAN BE RECYCLED.** Most, if not all, glass found in labs is borosilicate (commonly branded as “Pyrex”). It has a different melting point and chemical composition than single-use glass, therefore, it is a contaminant in consumer recycling. Lab glassware that has reached the end of its life must be disposed of in a cardboard box labeled with the room number and clearly marked as “lab glass” before setting outside the lab for collection.

## Plastic

You don’t need to separate plastics by “number.” It can all go in the same bin as long as it’s a large and thick enough piece of plastic. Styrofoam and plastic film are both recyclable, but you need to sort them out separate from mixed recycling. **Common (clean) lab items that are allowed in mixed recycling:**

- pipette boxes (trays and tips removed)
- plastic carboys with spouts removed
- centrifuge and other plastic bottles  $\geq 3$  inches in diameter
- serum bottles with labels defaced

## Other Considerations

**When you throw something away, it doesn’t disappear.** Humans are present sorting and quality checking throughout the entire waste process. There are common research items which tend to alarm non-scientists, such as **autoclave tape, chemical labels, and hazard symbols.** As a courtesy to the workers, please remove any autoclave tape on recyclable items, and deface any old labels on plastic bottles which might alarm a non-scientist. **Remember: all contributions to recycling must be free of biohazards and chemical residues.** Recyclable plastics get re-processed into food and beverage containers, so no hazardous chemical containers may be recycled, even if considered empty by EHS.

Plastic trash bags cannot be fully eliminated from waste collection processes, and since they clog the machinery when not fully removed, it’s best to avoid them wherever possible. When recycling a large amount of plastic bottles or pipette boxes, for example, the best practise is to put them in a box on a lab cart and wheel them down to the loading dock. You can dump the contents loose in the mixed containers dumpster.

## Resources

- UW Recycling: mixed containers
- Need to dispose of something else?
- UW Recycling training course (15 minutes)
- Recology Tour

