

GREEN LIVING

By Cile Downs

Recycling ○

A cycle is a wheel, a circle. A thing cycles around to the beginning again, and when it begins over on the same path, it recycles. Nowadays there is a lot of talk about recycling paper and cans and so on, and usually that is just what happens. The aluminum can be melted and made into more cans just as good as the originals; the same can be done with glass. In the case of aluminum, recycling is greatly superior to making new aluminum because of the immense amount of energy it takes to mine the bauxite ore and derive aluminum from it.

Recycled paper is almost as good as the original. Some strength is lost, because in the process of recycling the fibers become shorter, so they need to be mixed with some new material. Can you recycle recycled paper? Yes, but it becomes one step weaker each time. At any rate, it saves trees, energy and pollution to recycle paper. We all hope that more and more of the recycled product will be used, and fewer trees cut down for paper.

Now comes the sticky part, plastics. At present, the recycling of plastics is an imperfect process. Often, "recycled" just means shredded up and used for something else, insulation for instance. This really should be called "re-used" rather than "recycled". The plastic has not circled back to "go", and is not about to travel the same path again--it has gone out into the world and is about to lead an entirely different life. It is still on the face of the earth, polluting it eventually, while fossil fuels will be used to make more plastic to replace it.



sand. Anyhow, that's how it is in East Hampton right now, and the reason we're not separating the colors of glass at the town recycling bins.

It may well be a good trade-off to re-use plastics to replace wood, for instance in and around water. This saves cutting down more trees to replace timber that has rotted. Chemically treated wood is another (very troubling) subject, one that deserves its own column.

Some plant-based plastics have been developed, and that seems like a good idea. A hopeful sign is the appearance in the Gaiam Real Goods catalogue of compostable plastic picnic-ware. Made of corn sugars, potatoes, parts of sugar cane not used for sugar, and soy oil, they can be thrown on the compost heap with the garbage and returned harmlessly to earth. The only problem is their being a tad expensive to be sold in the supermarket, but this may improve. In the meantime, recycle what is recyclable and use as few plastics as possible.



Another case of "re-using" is what we are now doing with glass in East Hampton. I think it is a shame when I see ground-up glass being used for roads instead of being recycled. This is just an inexpensive way to get rid of it. I am sure this is a matter of the expense of trucking it a long way to find a glass recycling plant. On the other hand, as in the case of aluminum, it is probably more energy-expensive to make new glass out of