



# PANDEMIC PLASTIC

## Ways to Reduce the Increase in Waste

by Wendy Fachon

The propensity to stay at home over the past six months has brought about an increase in restaurant take-out ordering and online shopping, which has caused a dramatic increase in the use of foam packaging, plastic utensils and single-use condiment packaging, all of which Rhode Island residents are unable to place in the traditional roadside recycling bin. Instead, these items are thrown out for garbage collection and end up in the Central Landfill. With conscious effort, consumers can help reduce this waste.

First of all, foam items can be recycled in non-traditional ways. Since 2015, residents and businesses can bring food-service foam, as well as rigid-packaging foam, to the small-vehicle disposal area at the Central Landfill, in Johnston, to be recycled. This material can be dropped off for free during the facility's normal business hours, but must be segregated, cleaned, dried and bagged in clear or translucent bags. Food-service foam, such as coffee cups and food trays, tend to stack compactly and can be collected in a single bag overtime. These items must be bagged separately from rigid packaging foam or Styrofoam coolers. It is also important to note that the facility does not accept foam products such as packing peanuts and spongy foam. Many UPS or FedEx stores and gift shops, however, will gladly accept packing peanuts, as well as bubble wrap. This helps improve their bottom lines by reducing their own padding purchases.

In addition, when placing take-out orders over the phone, customers can request

that restaurants omit the plastic utensil sets that are pre-packaged in clear plastic and the condiment pouches. Typically, none of these items are recyclable, yet everyone has reusable utensils at home that are quick and easy to clean, and most people also have recyclable bottles of ketchup and mustard stocked in the refrigerator.

When recyclable bottles become empty, it is necessary to rinse all food residue from inside before placing in the recycling bin. The contaminated recyclables and non-recyclable items that people place in the recycling collection cause problems for operations at the Recycling Center. The center relies on everyone's efforts to clean and properly identify the containers that can go into the recycling bins.

### WHAT'S RECYCLABLE?

The Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation has an online A-Z Search Tool, which can be found at [atoz.rirrc.org](http://atoz.rirrc.org). For example, if someone types "egg carton" into the search bar, answers will appear for how to dispose of plastic, cardboard and Styrofoam egg cartons, as well as eggshells and plastic Easter eggs.

People can also reuse or repurpose plastic items. Plastic take-out containers with snap-on lids can be washed and stowed away, like Tupperware, to use when the need arises to save small portions of leftovers. When it comes to mitigating plastic waste, everyone can help.

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