

Taking our Personal Trash Inventory (PTI)



Measuring our personal contributions to municipal waste production and doing our part to minimize it.

A step-by-step guide by [Sustainable Jersey City](#).



Introduction:

What's the problem?

The U.S. has a major trash problem. In 2017, the U.S. generated almost 270 tons of trash in the municipal solid waste (MSW) stream. Over 50% of this trash ended up in landfills and just about 25% was recycled. The rest was composted or incinerated.

What can I do?

A **Personal Trash Inventory (PTI)** examines the trash that passes through your home on its way to its final destination. Doing a PTI is the first step in reducing the trash problem. This isn't a problem any individual can solve on their own, but as responsible citizens we can keep an eye on our PTI and do our part to initiate change.


You may even unlock some discoveries about yourself and your lifestyle along the way, as well as find ways to cut costs.


What's the key to reducing trash?


Up next, learn the six, easy-to-remember R's to reducing trash.


A quick & easy recipe for minimizing waste:





Refuse  to purchase environmentally harmful products

Reduce  your consumption of these products

Reuse  items as much as possible & avoid single-use products

Repair  things that are broken, rather than throwing them out and buying new

Repurpose  items that no longer serve their original purpose, but can have a second life serving a new function.

Recycle  but only as a last resort - and learn how to do so correctly to make the greatest impact.

Step 1:

What does my municipality allow in trash, compost & recycling?

Most towns and cities have rules on what can be trashed or recycled, and where and when to do so. Not all plastics can be recycled, for example, and many organic items can be composted as fertilizer.



Step 2:

Preparing to collect the trash.

For this PTI, you'll be collecting one week's worth of trash and one of recycling. Find separate containers to hold: paper & cardboard, glass/metal/plastics, compostable material, and the rest of the week's trash.



Step 3:

Collect what you throw away.

Collect all your trash for a week. Our lives are governed by a weekly cycle, so we need to include the whole week. We are gathering data for a later analysis so don't be critical of yourself or over analyze while you gather data.

Here are 6 quick suggestions that will make what follows easier.



Collect paper, cardboard, envelopes, junk mail, etc into one container.

This will probably include many boxes from delivered packages; of these, set aside the ones you may be able to reuse for mailing or storage.



Rinse out food containers (bottles, jars, cartons) so they do not attract unwanted visitors, or generate undesirable odors.

Put these in another bin.

You can separate the glass/plastic/metal among them later on.



Put compostable material in their own container,
being careful to follow the guidelines as to what is
and isn't compostable.

You can find them [here](#) on Sustainable Jersey City's site.



All else goes in the trash bin. When possible, do not include food wrappers in the trash stream yet. Wash them thoroughly and put them with the recyclables.

Later you can examine how much of this material ends up in a landfill. Some things - i.e. blood soaked pad under packaged meat - will just have to be trashed, after all.



Did something break that you were about to throw away?

Are there things you're just looking to get rid of?
Put these into a pile, too.



**Start your inventory the day after recycling collection.
Choose the size of the containers larger than you think you need.**

Just for fun you might want to take a picture of your set up before you begin
& your trash pile at the end of the week.



Step 4:

Preliminary Analysis - Sorting the Trash.

You have been collecting & tomorrow is recycling day. Time to do a quick inventory of your trash/recycling! In step 1 you learned what is required by your municipality.

In step 3 you collected your trash.

Now, we sort the trash into the “streams” required by the municipality. Let’s use Jersey City, NJ’s program as an example. Jersey City has one stream that picks up glass, plastic, metal & another that picks up paper & cardboard. Therefore we’ll need five piles:

Pile 1: Corrugated Cardboard

Pile 2: Paper

Pile 3: Glass, Plastic & Metal

Pile 4: Items that don’t go in either Trash or Recycling

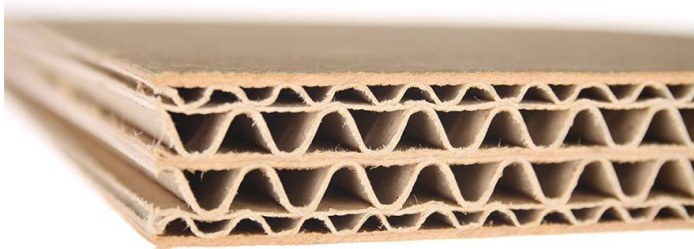
Pile 5: Compostables

Pile 6: Traditional trash, which will go to the Landfill or Incinerator

Piles 1 & 2:

Paper & Cardboard Streams

Separate the corrugated cardboard from the other paper. Corrugated cardboard has smooth outer layers with an inner layer that goes back and forth creating spaces within. Flatten the cardboard and put all the corrugated cardboard together. This can be bound together with twine.



Pile 3:

Glass, Metal & Plastic

Pull out all the glass from the trash pile, make sure it is clean, remove the cap and add it to this stream. If the cap is metal it can be added, if it is plastic, put it back in the trash pile (for now). Pull out all metal cans from the trash pile, make sure they are clean, and add them to the glass metal plastic pile. In Jersey City there are metal items that are not recyclable.



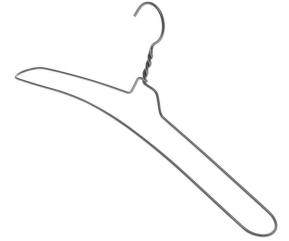
- Leave metal foil in the trash pile, even if it isn't contaminated by food.
- Metal utensils (like forks, knives, etc) are not recyclable.
- Coat hangers are not recyclable. Paint cans are not recyclable
- The old metal motor in the basement is not recyclable...





Pile 4:

Not Recyclable or Trash



Look through the trash for items that are not allowed in the waste stream. Examples are rechargeable batteries, tires, refrigerators, etc.

Remember! You can **refuse** to purchase products that are not recyclable. Depending on the options in your area, this may or may not be possible. Such lifestyle changes can be difficult, but **difficult is not impossible**.



Jersey City has special instructions for non-recyclable items [right here](#).



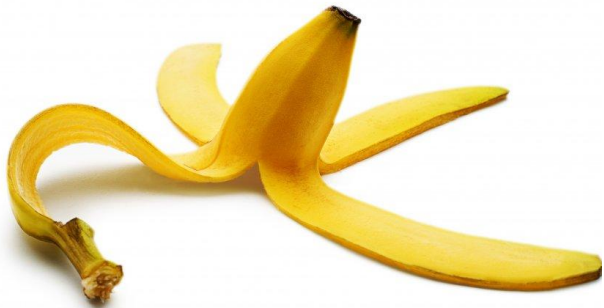


Pile 5:

Compostables

These are just a few examples of material you can deliver to your local composting pick up sites
- or to **compost on your own!**

There are plenty of resources online with tips for doing so, including [here on SJC's site](#).



A little something for everyone:

Never a better time.



In the wake of our current quarantine, many have been investigating new interests and activities to explore from home. Most of us, for better or worse, are spending more hours at home than we're used to. That means more time to **assess our lifestyles, daily routines and consumer choices**. Looking at you, grown ups.

Accessible among all.



A **treasure/scavenger hunt** among household items could make for a fun and productive shelter-in-place activity for families of any size and children of any age. Follow up with an **online hunt for eco-friendly alternatives** to replace your more troublesome products.

Extra credit.



As new semesters approach and school reopenings remain murky, designing projects based on HHW & NPS pollutant streams makes for a **great extracurricular activity** to share virtually. Concepts can easily be modified for elementary & middle school projects, while high school & college students can **develop more involved initiatives**.

Bit of friendly competition.



Gamify your findings - and double your efforts - by looping in friends, family, classmates/students and tracking your progress: how many products/practices identified, how many replaced, who's up for taking on the more ambitious projects & **going the extra mile**.

So, what's the damage?

Quantifying, tracking and minimizing our personal household wastes.



Bulk by the bag:

For those with scales - measuring the waste their household is producing is a great way to track progress.

For those without access - an easy way to keep track of how much waste you are accumulating is to go by trash bag size & number.

Common grocery bags (paper or plastic) are an easily measurable amount to keep track of. **How many did you fill this week, this month?**

If four, can you get it down to three?

That wasn't so hard.

Down to one?

Becoming conscious of how many bags you're filling will also make you more aware of the **types of things you're throwing away**: from products that use excessive or non-recyclable packaging, to dodgy items you're not sure how to properly dispose of.



Remember that we all live downstream.

Prompts for further mindfulness and incentives for managing our waste streams:

Consider impacts of household & landscaping waste on our water systems.

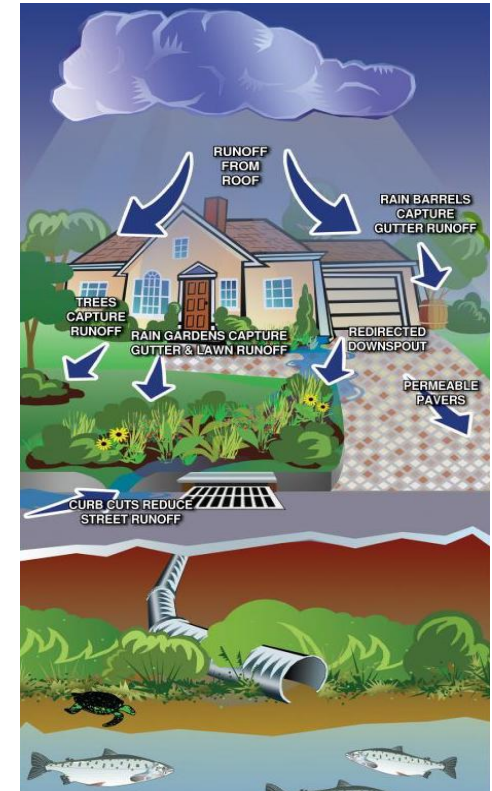
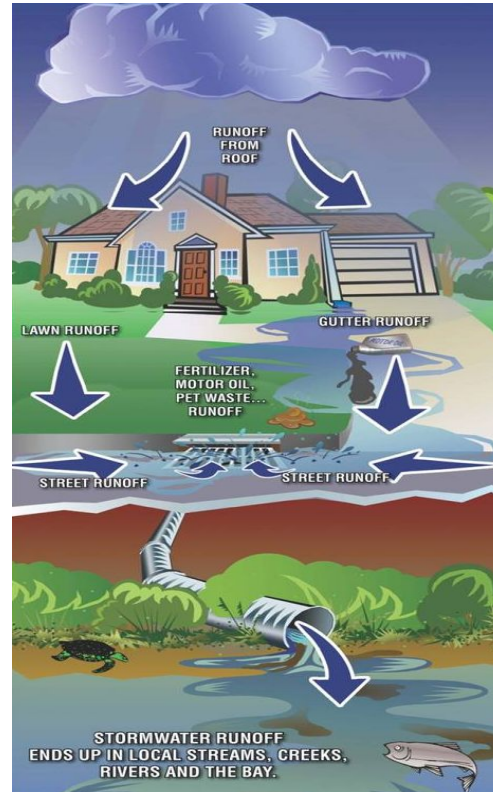
Take a second look at popular products: comb through ingredients, trace their chemical & nutrient fates in our systems.

Consider effects on both health & ecology.

Learn about environmental- & climate justice, and how our everyday habits and consumption trickles down to affect frontline communities.

Document & illustrate in visuals, writing or social media the journey of your newly adapted lifestyle.

Encourage those who have similar lifestyles and preferences as yours to collaborate & brainstorm together.



Alright! Now that we have your attention -

Once you've got a handle on all this trash business, why not take the next step?
Getting started was the hardest part, and doing more will come naturally.

SJC has done the homework for you, with both [links](#) to share & ways to [get involved](#).
No need to go it alone: [come and join the effort as part of your community!](#)

[Complete Personal Trash Inventory \(PTI\) Step-by-Step Document](#)

Document your experience, from collecting to sorting and stories along the way!
[You can share photos and videos here.](#)

When you've successfully completed your PTI, please share your results and feedback
[by taking this survey.](#)

Here's an app that might help you along the way: [Recycle Coach](#)

And here's the [Privacy Policy](#) associated with all SJC surveys.