

# It's time to develop a recycling consciousness

By Margretta Morris

There's no nice way to say this: we're all guilty of generating too much trash! According to the U.S. EPA, Americans generated about 254 million tons of trash in 2013 and recycled and composted about 87 million tons. While a national recycling rate of 34.3 percent doesn't sound too bad, it's not very good when compared to other states and developed countries, such as those in the European Union where rates are in the 50-plus percent range for recycling.

Individually, this means that you and I recycled or composted about 1.51 pounds of our average waste generation of 4.4 pounds per person per day. You're probably thinking to yourself "No way! I don't throw away that much trash every day."

But calculated in those numbers are the everyday products that we discard daily, and also yearly, whether we're talking about old beat up furniture, unusable clothing, torn books, all kinds of food containers, grass clippings, appliances, sports gear, etc.

So, on average, we do throw that much away. The numbers are there, and while some may dispute the national average as being either 28 percent or 34.3 percent recycling, let's not quibble over single digit differentials.

What's important is that we start thinking more about what materials we dispose of and how we do so. Everyone, unless they live in a cave, has heard about the 3Rs, being reduction, reuse and recycling. There is a fourth "R" but that's for a later discussion.

Everything that we get rid

of should be analyzed before it gets tossed. In the recycling and waste industry, we now call analyzing our trash "materials management" in the hopes that we can educate everyone to become more aware of our sometimes wasteful purchasing and disposal habits. We all need to understand that conserving resources can result in slowing climate change, and whether you're sold on our human impact on the climate or not, it's hard to deny that reusing resources isn't a good thing.

So what can each of us do? Source reduction for residents means thinking about what you buy and whether you need it or you want it. It doesn't mean you can never buy anything new again, but it does encourage you to think about why you're purchasing a particular product or

item.

Reusing is very easy to implement - again - just by thinking before something is thrown away. Could a family member use it? Would a local thrift store be able to sell or give it away? Could it be re-purposed?

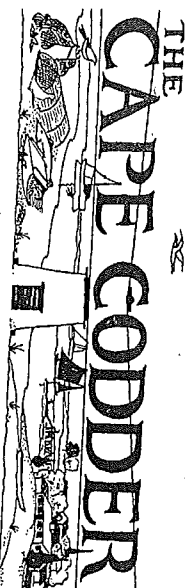
Recycling, too, is easy here on the Cape as all towns have recycling collection or drop-off programs. When we recycle, we're recovering usable materials such as plastic, paper, glass and metal and then a manufacturer is using it as feedstock to make new products.

Want to go one step further? Home composting involves setting aside your household organic waste, such as fruit and veggie scraps and yard trimmings, and easily managing their natural decomposition right in your own back yard.

The resulting compost is a great natural fertilizer and a fantastic and economical alternative to chemicals.

So if you want to go from guilty to not-so-guilty start thinking about what you throw away and manage your discarded materials responsibly so they can be used again through reuse, recycling or composting. The Cape is our home; let's manage all our resources more wisely!

*Margretta Morris is chair of the Brewster Recycling Commission, is also employed by Cotuit and sits on a variety of boards including MassRecycle, the Federation of New York Solid Waste Associations, the Go Green Initiative and the Pennsylvania Recycling Markets Council.*



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