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## Bachelor of Recycling required

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**ROYSON JAMES**

The average Toronto homeowner deserves a diploma in waste management – such is the scholarship required to practise the 3Rs and help the city divert 70 per cent of its waste by 2010.

Yes, you can put aluminum pie plates in the blue box. No, you cannot recycle aluminum foil – at least, not here.

Why? Apparently, the industry sets the rules – something about the "aluminum smelter. We can (recycle) aluminum cans and pie plates, but not aluminum foil – for metallurgic reasons," explains waste czar Geoff Rathbone.

Despite what your waste calendar says, starting the week of Dec. 8, city hall will accept your foam packaging, meat trays and cups and plates – yes, the polystyrene foam products once scorned as an enemy of the Earth. Ditto for retail plastic bags – all plastic, not ones mixed with metal or other handles.

But don't feed Blue with cups, egg cartons, muffin and croissant and berry boxes made of clear and smoked polystyrene plastics. They may look like the same material used for bottled water, but the chemists among us can tell the difference.

"The reasons we are not taking these is that not all strawberry and muffin takeout packages are polystyrene," says Rathbone. "There are a number of different kinds of plastic resin. We cannot expect residents to sort polystyrene ... we can't expect them to be polymer chemists."

The city used to suggest one look for the number entered in the universal recycling icon on these products. Without enrolling in a university course, the clear plastic is essentially polyethylene terephthalate, or PET. And PET was No. 1.

"The number system was fine when PET was No. 1," Rathbone says. But now, "a No. 1 is not always a No. 1," if you get his drift.

"We are on the cusp of being able to manage the two kinds of rigid clear polystyrene, but not close to handling chip bags," he says.

And you wonder why residents are signing up for classes in chemistry and metallurgy, just to put out their green, grey and blue bins with confidence.

Those from other jurisdictions, where putting out the trash is much less of a cerebral occupation, should know Torontonians get a waste management calendar. The centre spread is a guide on what to put where, not to mention when and how.

According to the guide:

Put your ice cream box and flour bags in the compost green bin, but your dryer lint and fabric softener sheets must be "discarded" as garbage. Those anti-static sheets are made from synthetic fibres. And, actually, the ice cream box and flour bags are paper products and can be placed in the blue bin as well.

Plastic bottles go in the blue box, with their lids on; but glass bottles and jars go in headless. Empty aerosol cans have a place in the blue box, but not their caps.

Apparently, it has to do with the mix. Glass and metal are destined to different end uses, so the recycler wants them separated. But why keep the water bottle and its lid fastened together? If you separate them, the mechanical sorter will miss a lot of the little caps and they'll end up in the dump.

Rathbone is a man of immense patience. Still, this system rankles.

Queen's Park should insist on product stewardship that says if you make and package a product, it must be compatible with the consumer's recycling system.

If anyone is going to need a university degree to put the trash out, it should be the seller, not the buyer.

*Royson James usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Email: [rjames@thestar.ca](mailto:rjames@thestar.ca)*