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Identifying what types of plastics are recyclable can be challenging because plastics do not always carry a resin code and because not all recycling programs are equal, either.

"We always encourage people to focus on Nos. 1, 2 and 5 because we have great markets for them in the U.S.," said Brent Bell, vice president of recycling at Waste Management, a major garbage collection and recycling company. Water and soda bottles, milk jugs, laundry detergent bottles, yogurt cups and butter tubs are mostly made of these plastics. You could lend a helping hand by rinsing these kinds of containers and removing labels.

On the other hand, placing items made with resins 4, 6 and 7 in the recycling bin is usually not a good idea. These are used to make squeezable bottles, plastic bags, pouches, meat trays, some clamshells and disposable plates and cups. Sorting plants will quite likely throw them in a landfill, together with other items considered contaminants.

Finally, No.3 -- the category that covers the PVCs often the used in packaging for cosmetics, some food wrap, blister packs and pipes -- is particularly bad. Because of its chemical composition, it can contaminate large batches of plastics in the recycling system that would otherwise be acceptable. "You want to make sure that you never, ever put PVC into your recycling bin," said Steve Alexander, president of the Association of Plastics Recyclers, an industry group.

Regardless of what they're made of, shopping bags and other soft plastics like cling film and Bubble Wrap shouldn't be put in recycling bins because they tend to jam sorting machines.

Of one exists, your local recycling program should have information online about the types of plastics it accepts. If you can't get a clear answer there, though, the best policy is not to guess.

"If in doubt, keep it out," Mr. Alexander said.

1, 2 and 5 = good

4, 6 and 7, PVCs and soft plastics = bad