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## When Lamorinda recycles, one man's trash becomes another man's treasure

By Vera Kochan



Where do Lamorinda's recyclables wind up once the blue bins are emptied into a trash truck each week? It lands at Mt. Diablo Resource Recovery in Pittsburg, Calif. (with the help of partners such as Republic Services and RecycleSmart).

Started in the 1930s by the Garaventa family in Concord, the facility currently serves over 250,000 residents and thousands of businesses, promising to "reduce, reuse, recycle, respect, and recover." Their company philosophy states, "Every day at Mt. Diablo Resource Recovery we commit our people and our systems to elevating the environment, economic, and community value of every material stream we collect and process. We call our philosophy Community Resource Optimization."

MDDR's CEO Kish Rajan and General Manager Jim Nejedly gave this reporter a crash course in recycling methodology and a tour of the facility's already processed inventory. According to Rajan, the 40-acre site handles 1,500 tons each day with the help of 360 employees. Their 100 all-renewable diesel trucks operate in the Pittsburg, Concord and Oakley area, and the single stream recycling from Lamorinda, Walnut Creek, and Danville area is delivered by Republic Services.

They accept all colors of glass and prefer that the lids are separated from the containers; aluminum cans, foil, cookie sheets, tin cans, etc. should be clean; plastics No. 1 to No. 7, detergent bottles, lids and caps, water jugs, and more also belong in the blue bin; a wide assortment of paper from telephone books and computer paper, to junk mail, magazines, and newspapers, just to name a few, are perfect for recycling. However, the one culprit in the form of corrugated, used pizza boxes should always go into the green bin. The oils from pizza boxes cause unnecessary contamination and damage throughout the recycling process. "Greasy pizza boxes contaminate clean recycling and are expensive for the recycling industries," states the recyclemore.com website. "It's estimated that contamination costs recyclers \$700 million per year due to damaged machinery, the cost of disposing of non-recyclable materials, and wasted time."

MDDR also collects approximately 600 pounds a week in household batteries from places such as CVS's small green buckets which are located near most of the stores' entrances for customer convenience.

All too often, residents throw damaged garden hoses (which belong in the black landfill bins) into the blue bins. On average, 25% of what comes to the plant under the guise of recycling winds up in landfills. Rajan explained that the "reuse" pickup day (held twice a year) is a great way for people to get rid of items in the home that they no longer want, but could be reused by someone else (provided things are in working order). These reusable items go to an onsite warehouse location where nonprofit organizations can collect things for reuse by homeless shelters or others less fortunate. The trucks that come by neighborhoods on "reuse" days should have the company logos on them and their drivers will be in uniform. Trucks with no recycle logos or uniformed personnel should be reported, as they are not part of the program. During RecycleSmart's 2022 Reuse program, 37,373 households were visited, 3.4 million pounds of items were collected and donated, and 165,000 pounds of books were collected for redistribution.

When it comes to sorting plastics from the non-desirable items, Nejedly explained that a conveyor belt carries the items past a machine labeled NRT (National Recovery Technologies) that operates as an optical sorter. When it spots an item that doesn't belong, an air cannon blasts the item off the conveyor belt and into a separate bin. Other equipment can spot the wrong items along a conveyor belt route and use claws much like those in arcade games to grab the offending piece.

Old corrugated cardboard (OCC) is separated from other paper which goes through a processing machine "much like watching lasagna being made," said Rajan. He visited a recycled paper plant and watched while the paper was saturated with water that turned it into a mushy pulp. After additional processing the finished product came out the other end looking like sheets of pasta.

Tin and metal are highly recyclable and is bought by a company in Washington state. Due to California's strict environmental regulations many forms of recycling are no longer allowed and are outsourced.

According to Nejedly, all of MDDR's glass is sold to the Gallo Glass Company in Modesto, whose parent company is E. & J. Gallo Winery. Gallo makes its own glass bottles using up to 75% of recycled glass. Their

glass processing plant goes through 150 thousand tons of recycled glass a year, and manufactures 2 million bottles a day for its own private use.

The company is on track to build a future Mt. Diablo Resource Recovery Park thanks to an agreement with the city of Pittsburg to improve services through the use of new innovations. A first step is to comply with California's upcoming regulations with regards to zero emissions vehicles. Also in the works are collection vehicles that are able to detect if there is a "contamination" in the blue recycle bin. In other words, a significantly large enough item that belongs in one of the other bins. If it happens on a regular basis, a citation could be in the resident's future.

"People want to recycle more and are trying to be more conscientious about what they put in," Rajan said optimistically, "but you can't use your recycle can just because your garbage can is full just to get rid of it."

For more information visit: [mdrr.com](http://mdrr.com).

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