

# Recycling Styrofoam

By [Green Living Tips](#) | Published 09/30/2009

## Recycling polystyrene - aka Styrofoam

Styrofoam is a trademark of the Dow company, but the material itself is called polystyrene. Like so many other plastics, it's all around us - very commonly used in packing material as peanuts or expanded foam, in food trays and a wide variety of other products - even explosives such as napalm and hydrogen bombs!

The bad news is (aside from its use in WMD); polystyrene is manufactured from petroleum. It's highly flammable and a chemical called benzene, which is a known human carcinogen, is used in its production.

## Polystyrene in the environment

Polystyrene foam, used commonly as padding in appliance packaging, takes an incredibly long time to break down in the environment and additionally, animals may ingest it which blocks their digestive tracts and ultimately causes starvation. This foam is also abundant in the [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#).

Given the nature of polystyrene, it's surprising that such an energy intensive, oil sucking and toxic substance is allowed to be used as packaging for food; particularly for items such as meat where the food has direct contact with it. Nearly two dozen cities in the USA have banned the use of polystyrene for this purpose.

Packaging and products containing polystyrene can usually be identified by a [recycling triangle logo](#) with the number 6 inside it stamped on the item.

It's likely to be a very long time before the use of polystyrene is totally discontinued, and while we can try to buy products that don't utilize the stuff, we need to deal with the Styrofoam that winds up in our hands instead of it heading straight to landfill.

Unfortunately many curbside recycling programs don't accept polystyrene and given its bulk, it can be difficult to store. Also, polystyrene is often recycled to be used in single use products; such as more packing material, so it's really important to get the word out about recycling this form of packaging.

## Burning polystyrene

Some people choose to burn polystyrene in order to be rid of the stuff, believing that as chloro-fluoro hydrocarbons were eliminated from expanded polystyrene over a decade ago, it was safe to do so. The burning of polystyrene releases styrene gas which can affect the nervous system. Also, as it usually burns with a sooty flame, this indicates combustion isn't complete and a complex mixture of toxic chemicals can be produced by the relatively low temperature of a backyard burn.



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### **Keeping polystyrene out of the waste stream**

A pound of polystyrene recycled is a pound of new polystyrene that doesn't have to be created. Currently in the USA expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam packaging is being recycled at a rate of approximately 10-12% each year.

Here are a few tips as to what you can do with polystyrene to keep it out of the waste stream for as long as possible.

**Keep it as packing** - how many times have you needed to pack something for shipping and found you had nothing on hand? Break down large lumps of Styrofoam into smaller chunks and keep a bag of it handy

**Craft shops** - I've read that craft shops are often a good place to take Styrofoam as their customers use it in their craft projects.

**Earth911.org** - If you're in the USA, there's a search function at the top of the [Earth911](http://Earth911) web site where you can enter the term "polystyrene" and then in the box on the right, enter your location. The search results will provide listings of companies and organizations in your local area that will take polystyrene. **Note:** be sure to enter "polystyrene" rather than "Styrofoam" as the latter, being just a brand name, is unlikely to return any results.

**Planters** - I've seen it used in pot plants to assist with drainage and as filler - however, I'm not sure about the possibility of contamination when used in this way.

**Mail back initiative** - The [Alliance of Foam Packaging Recyclers](#) offers a mail back program to USA residents; whereby you send the polystyrene in via the US mail service. There's a cost involved (postage), but this may prove more economical to you than carting it somewhere by car. You can learn more about this option [here](#).

**Sell it!** - If polystyrene is something you get a lot of; you might be able to make a few bucks from it. The [Recycled Plastic Markets Database](#) allows you to search for buyers of a wide variety of plastics.

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