

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Batteries Need Recycling Too

Dear EcoGirl: Where can I throw away my old household batteries around here? *Signed, Stacking Up in Sebastopol*

Dear Stacking Up: Congratulations for knowing that batteries don't go in the trash, because their toxic metals will leach from landfills, be released by incineration, and poison our air and water. For example, the EPA says that about 75% of the cadmium in landfills comes from batteries. Even a small amount can spread and do significant harm to animals, the environment, and ourselves.

The best source of information about how to properly dispose of batteries and other toxics locally is the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency (SCWMA). Look at their website <www.recyclenow.org> or the Recycling section in your AT&T phone book (in the Yellow Pages under R). For more information, call the EcoDesk at (707) 565-DESK (3375).

Individuals can dispose of used batteries locally through these three avenues:

(1) Local stores. Look at SCWMA's website or phone book section for a list of local dropoff points and what battery types they'll accept. For example, many Longs stores will accept both alkaline (regular) and rechargeable batteries. Tape both battery ends, put them in a plastic bag, and bring them to the photo department or customer service desk. Rechargeables are also accepted at AT&T Wireless, Best Buy, Home Depot, Radio Shack, Target, Wal-Mart, and more.

(2) The Household Toxics Waste Facility. Sonoma County residents can drop off batteries and other toxics at the dump's Household Toxics Waste Facility (between Cotati and Petaluma). Check the website for hours and further information.

(3) Community Toxics Collection Days. See the website to find out when one will be near you and how to sign up.

Businesses with notable battery waste, or interested in offering a customer drop-off point, can get a convenient mail order recycling service (for a modest fee) through The Big Green Box, <www.biggreenbox.com>, (877) 461-2345.

Bonus Round! For those who want to earn eco-bonus points, look for ways to minimize your battery waste. Each year in North America, over 15 billion batteries are sold, creating extensive toxic materials to be processed. Single-use batteries are also a very inefficient use of energy. According to the UK's environmental agency, manufacturing a typical single-use AA battery takes about 50 times as much energy as it provides.

The quickest way to reduce your waste — plus save money and use energy wisely — is to get a recharger and rechargeable batteries. For a small initial investment, you can trim your battery waste by at least 80% and potentially save hundreds of dollars a year by getting many uses from each battery. (It's recommended that you still use alkalines for critical safety equipment, such as smoke detectors and flashlights, as they hold their charge longer.)

Look for a recharger that meets your needs at local hardware or office supply stores, or online at <www.realgoods.com>. Some rechargers will also renew alkaline batteries. If you do buy alkalines, consider Fuji's "green" (no mercury) variety. Big Lots in Santa Rosa has them at a great price. It's ecological and economical!

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guide to Sonoma, Napa, and Mendocino Counties, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter, which gently educates readers about toxics and alternatives.

Have questions about going green? Email them to <ecogirl@healthyworld.org> with "EcoGirl" in the subject line.

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Published July 2007, West County Gazette.