



**Richard Tarlov surveys a landscape of stuff destined for recycling and composting.**

**Photo by Michael Waldstein**

## Canyon Market Aims for Zero Waste

Do you suffer from Recycling Anxiety, Composting Angst or Garbage Guilt?

by **Bonnee Waldstein**

Are you about to leap off Billy Goat Hill to end forever your confusion about which waste goes where? Have you experienced existential frustration over the futility of ever saving our doomed planet?

Maybe you need a PGA (Personal Garbage Assistant). Last year, Canyon Market had one of sorts, in the person of Rachel Woods-Robinson, who had just graduated from San Francisco's School of the Arts high school. There, she and some friends had started an Environmental Club whose major accomplishment was building a compost station on campus and distributing and collecting compost bins between classrooms. Woods-Robinson was shocked to see how much useful stuff was being thrown away.

Richard and Janet Tarlov, proprietors of Canyon Market, were having similar revelations. Running a complex business, while trying to be responsible environmental stewards and keeping down their operating costs, was a daunting challenge. They needed someone who had the enthusiasm, brains and creativity to study their waste cycle and come up with new ways to reduce it; someone who could share ideas with the staff so the program could carry on; someone like Rachel.

In a three-week period after she graduated and before she started classes at UCLA (where she majors in Ethnomu-

sicology and will add a second major—either astrophysics or environmental science), she conducted her hands-on study. Here's how she describes it.

"I figured out which days the Sunset Scavenger garbage truck came, and decided to analyze Canyon Market's waste a day after the truck came. It turned out to be a war zone. My ammunition: a box of latex gloves, swine flu masks, a pile of tools and the ability to hold my breath for long periods of time. My enemy: a two-square-yard dumpster."

She then did five "dumpster dives," separating recyclables, compostables and garbage. She separated out items that could be composted or recycled, weighed them and measured the volume. She found that 43 percent of what was being thrown away was not actually trash! Sunset Scavenger charges for garbage but not recycling and composting, so that's where a lot of savings can be realized. Right away she was able to divert materials from the dumpster (that would be the black bin from Sunset Scavenger, for residential users) into recyclables and compostables.

Recyclables are taken by Sunset Scavenger to Recycle Central at Pier 96, where they are sorted, baled and shipped all over the world to be made into new products. One destination, Epic Plastics in Lodi, uses the materials for landscaping products such as timbers and header boards. Sunset Scavenger takes the compost material to a facility in Vacaville where it is processed and distributed to farms,

orchards and vineyards as "Four Course Compost," which is so rich in nutrients that farmers call it "black gold."

By contrast, the trash that Sunset removes ends up in a landfill in Livermore where it will reside, literally, forever, wreaking environmental havoc.

The key to ongoing savings and social benefit was training the Canyon Market staff. A lot of changes resulted, both big and small.

Reducing waste means discarding less food—either cooking it or having it picked up by Food Runners to deliver to seniors and the needy, setting unusable scraps aside for compost. It means recycling all clean paper, cardboard, plastic bottles and hard plastic materials. Signs around the store serves as reminders and helps the workers keep everything sorted consistently.

The store's compressor is a Star Trek-worthy behemoth of a machine that provides a computer-controlled system for the refrigerators, freezers and retail coolers. It uses only the energy that's needed, where it's needed. Richard Tarlov is clearly enamored of this "very reliable, brilliant system," which also uses heat generated by the compressor to heat water. The market needs only a standard domestic hot water heater to supplement this supply.

With the limited space available, having enough bins for recycling and composting throughout the market, in the appropriate sizes and colors for nearby activities, has proved to be a logistical problem.

Another challenge is—us. The sorting bins provided for the public in the outdoor seating area are routinely misused; sorting those discards is one of the more frustrating tasks.

Canyon Market is also interested in

helping Glen Parkers with their personal recycling needs. There are bins where people can deposit their clean plastic bags and plastic wrap (this drop-off service is mandated by the state), fluorescent and high-intensity-discharge (HID) light bulbs, and batteries. People can bring in their used cooking grease and ask the staff to put it into the store's barrel. And the latest addition to the recycling arsenal, corks.

Tarlov praises the successful efforts of everyone involved in the program, which has cut the dumpster size in half and saved \$415 a month, a 73 percent discount.

San Francisco currently recovers 72 percent of discarded materials. Being diligent about reducing our trash will take us toward meeting the goal of 75 percent diversion from the landfill this year and zero waste by 2020. ■

**Here's a quick primer on some of the complexities of "what goes where":**

### **Compost (green bin):**

- All food scraps
- Food-stained paper including brown paper towels, napkins, cardboard, bags, containers, trays, coffee cups and clutches, plates, butcher wrap
- Compostable takeout containers
- Waxy milk/juice cartons if not foil lined
- Clean wood pieces less than 4 feet
- Flowers and leaves

### **Recycle (blue bin):**

- All clean paper: newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, shopping bags, cardboard (without foil or waxy lining) like coffee trays, egg cartons.
- Plastic bottles and lids
- Plastic coffee lids
- Clean hard plastic labeled 1-7
- Plastic takeout containers, forks, spoons, knives, straws - wiped of food as much as possible
- Clean glass bottles and lids (not broken)
- Clean metal/aluminum cans
- Aluminum foil and trays (ball it up)

### **Garbage (black bin):**

- Anything with human/animal waste, including used tissues, etc.
- Broken glass or ceramics
- Containers; packaging with mixed materials, such as cardboard containers with plastic
- Paper that can't be recycled
- Stickers
- Food-stained or clear plastic bags
- Bubble wrap
- Styrofoam

## Where Does It All Go, Anyway? Recycling Sorts Itself Out

The North Fork of Islais Creek rises from the upper stretches of Glen Canyon Park, flows toward the Recreation Center, then is swallowed into a big underground tube that carries it beneath the ball field, under Paradise Street, behind St. John's School, 12 feet below Wilder Street, then generally under Bosworth Street, San Jose Avenue and I-280. It joins the South Fork and continues eastward beneath the produce/industrial area, finally spilling from an outfall under the CalTrain tracks into Islais Channel.

This channel opens to the bay right at Pier 96, at the end of Cargo Way. I envisage the stream of the creek as analogous to the "waste stream" of our discards.

What's so special about that? Pier 96 is *the* place where those big red-and-white Sunset Scavenger trucks with the big sneezes and the clanking metal bin shakers deposit their heavy loads. All told, sorting is done there for 16 types of materials including paper, cardboard, metals, glass and plastics. A constant parade of some 300 of these discard collectors arrives there from 4 a.m. to about 4 p.m. every day except Sunday to deposit the material they collect from our blue recycle bins.

The trucks back into one end of a huge building, covered on the south side with solar panels, which furnish some 30 percent of the plant's power needs.

The giant pile from our neighborhood trucks disappears over the course of a day with voracious dinosaur-bites of big front-loaders. They dump it onto huge conveyor "disassembly" lines where it is sorted and tossed into multiple bins with rapid care by nearly 100 masked and gloved sorters.

I was treated to an information-laden tour by the public relations manager for Recology-Sunset Scavenger San Francisco, Robert Reed. He led me to an almost overwhelmingly huge set of very noisy machines that help sort and classify our waste. His familiarity and inspired conversation showed his pride in the accomplishments of this immense operation.

Huge tilted and vibrating conveyer belts lift the garbage mix almost three stories up. Some of the bigger stuff spills off and is collected, some is shaken off

and collected and the rest is dumped on long, flat conveyer belts. The resulting mix is subjected in several places to several treatments—magnets pick up iron objects, sorters pull off plastics and heavy objects, other places collect glass (whole and broken), aluminum cans are whished off the belt by an electronic whoosher (whose official name is an "eddy current separator").

At the end of a day, more than 30 shipping containers are filled with mattress-sized paper bundles strapped with wire—to be sent (sold) to a paper recycler. Whole glass bottles are sorted by color (green, clear, amber) and shipped to a glass recovery plant. Broken glass is collected in bins and shipped as mixed glass, to be re-formed. Aluminum cans are mashed and sold to an aluminum foundry. Iron is collected and sold to an iron foundry.

### Reaching zero waste will take some time and money.

A quandary is what to do with the many types of plastic: clear bottles and heavy colorless containers are OK for the blue recycling bins, but not plastic bags or other films or flimsy plastics. Those lightweight plastics

wrap around recycling equipment and contaminate paper bales. They should be collected and disposed of separately; the Diamond Heights Safeway has a recycling bin for them outside its west entrance. If you find a throwaway paper on your sidewalk, separate its wrapper before you toss the paper in the blue bin.

A San Francisco ordinance bans plastic bags at grocery stores and large drug stores. The City recommends that shoppers use canvas carry bags. That, like metal coffee mugs and water bottles, is an example of reuse, and reuse is superior to recycling.

What happens to wood from construction projects and food scraps from our green compost collection bins? Most of this goes to construction recycling and food-scrap transfer operations at 501 Tunnel Avenue's just west of Highway 101 near Candlestick Park.

Recyclable construction stuff from large projects can be handled on that long, flat mound you can glimpse through the trees on your way to SFO. Contractors and individuals can bring small loads, as well as household hazardous wastes such as paint and cleaning products. Most organic products sorted

here are sent to chippers and grinders, creating astonishingly fertile compost after being laid out in rows to become compost.

Reed showed me some photos of vineyards treated with compost and planted with root-producing cover crops. The crops are harvested, while the roots are left to decay in the ground and become compost themselves. Best of all, these cover crops pull carbon from the atmosphere and return carbon and nutrients to the soil.

One more point: the black bins. Reed, a bit embarrassed, said there isn't yet the technology to get "all" waste separated and recycled. A key step we can take now is to help everyone see the environmental upside of recycling and composting. Once people better understand the true environmental benefit, they are more attentive to recycling.

Reaching *zero* waste will take some time and money. For now, the stuff is compressed and sent to the dump in the Altamont Pass area.

It would be impossible to recount here the many projects Recology has in the works. All are directed toward driving recycling to 100 percent while at the same time being as green as possible. Their 385 collection trucks and 37 transfer trucks run on alterna-

tive fuels, primarily biodiesel. These are the trucks whose drivers we see every week in our neighborhoods. They are incredibly facile at getting those big machines between autos on our narrow streets, often with only 2 inches clearance. You know them. They are friendly, dedicated and competent.

Recology is the new overall name for the combination of several agencies in the tremendous effort of San Francisco to recycle 100 percent of the waste stream. It is the umbrella for several familiar names: SF Recycling & Disposal (now Recology San Francisco), Sunset Scavenger, Golden Gate Disposal. In addition to our neighborhoods, most city businesses rely on Recology for their waste pickups, debris boxes and shredded material.

Visiting the Pier 96 Recology Center certainly boosted my confidence in our efforts to control waste and emphasize a rethinking of the act of how we discard *any* material: just about everything we "throw away" *will* be picked up, carefully and individually sorted into classes, bound, collected in huge containers or compacted into bundles to be sold and reused as something new.

For more information, contact [www.recology.com](http://www.recology.com). ■

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