Tips from a bag lady

Before I moved to Switzerland in 2006, I imagined I would be a glamorous expat, visiting Paris on weekends, growing geraniums outside a cute chalet and cooking fondue with the real cheese. In reality, I became a bag lady. Join me for a look at how to recycle, re-use and generally triumph over your Swiss trash.

Recycling can help eliminate scenes like this

By Chantal Panozzo | In the United States, trash had never triumphed over me. In fact, I never really thought much about its disposal and had most definitely never spent a Friday night stressing out over the proper bundling of old newspapers and discarded cereal boxes. I soon discovered if there's any place where trash can get the better of you, it's in Switzerland.

The regulations of rubbish

When you register for residency in your new Swiss hometown, you're handed a booklet. This booklet – in languages that don't generally include English – details what to do with your trash. No matter the indistinguishable text; for me, looking at the pictures was enough to make me realise that either my Americanised trash habits were underdeveloped or the Swiss have a strange relationship with garbage.

Bring glass here. Put apple cores there. Take aluminium here. Deposit batteries over there. And the paper recycling? I didn't quite understand that one until I saw it with my own eyes. Every six weeks, on Friday evenings outside my building, neat stacks of paper, all tied into little bundles with string, seemed to magically appear.

Gone were the days when I could lazily throw my garbage into one unidentifiable bag and all of my recycling into another bin and simply put it out on the curb once a week for pick-up.

Evading the garbage police

In Switzerland, being a bag lady is a way of life. No one will bat an eye if you carry

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The Confederation's waste guide

The **Federal Office for the Environment** provides a thorough guide for the disposal of many typical household items – from CDs and florescent lights to large household appliances and old tyres. You can learn more, and find out about the country's long-term management and treatment plans at: **www.bafu.admin.ch/abfall/01472/index.html?lang=en**

bags full of everything from empty bottles and Styrofoam pieces to used batteries around town. But they will shoot you looks of disapproval as you dispose of your glass bottles on a Saturday morning because the recycling container for glass near the centre of town clearly states you are only allowed to dispose of this kind of trash on workdays from 10:00–20:00. Some people work on Saturdays too, don't they?

But no matter, after you've hauled 10 pounds of glass across town, rules tend to matter less and less. With creases from the heavy bags permanently engraved in your hands, you're willing to risk anything to get rid of the glass – even the garbage police.

The Swiss aren't plagued by high rates of homicide, but they do have trash and a lot of free time. Thus, the police often have nothing better to do than cruise the streets looking for people who put their trash out earlier than the rules allow.

And they don't stop there. They'll also open these rebel trash bags and pull out things that could've been recycled, but weren't. Once they discover you tossed an aluminium can into your regular trash, they are relentless. The entire bag of garbage will be searched to determine who the culprit is, the evidence will be photographed, and a fine of SFr 250 will be levied if they determine it's you.

With all of this fear surrounding Swiss garbage disposal, I trained myself to never throw anything with my name on it in my trash bag. Eventually, this got a bit exhausting. In the end, I had no choice but to become a recycling and trash expert – or spend my life worrying about the possibility of having a criminal record.

Becoming garbage gods and goddesses

The most important thing you need to become an expert yourself is the waste disposal and recycling guide for your community. Usually, they're mailed to you by the city at the end of the year or given to you when you register in your town.

Though the name of the guide can vary from community to community, it will generally resemble *Entsorgungskalender/Calendrier de ramassage/Calendario dei rifiuti*. If you are not already the proud owner of one, practice saying the name a few times and then stop by your town hall and ask for it.

If you're still primarily a one-language wonder, you can use the following advice as a loose translation tool for your new "trashy novel". Keep in mind though, the guidelines vary by community, so this is only a general overview to help you escape from a life of hefty fines and shame.

In some of the bigger cities like Zurich and Geneva, the guides may even be available in English. In such cases, there's really no excuse for becoming anything less than a garbage god or goddess.

Did you know … ?

Recycling aluminium saves up to 95 per cent of the energy required to produce it from virgin materials, according to the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment. They also note that 88 per cent of aluminium cans in Switzerland are recycled.

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General trash

To throw away items that can't be recycled or disposed of otherwise (see below), you will need a trash bag. But it can't be just any trash bag. It must be a special city or town garbage bag.

These are available for purchase at places like Migros, Coop, Denner, your town hall, city tourist information bureau or even the post office, depending on the community. The bags come in four sizes – 17, 35, 60 and 110 litres. The standard size bag that fits under your kitchen sink is 35 litres.

The cost differs by community, but you can expect to pay roughly SFr 2 per bag for the 35-litre size. You'll need to ask for a roll at the cashier or customer service desk, because the bags are so valuable they aren't kept on the shelves.

Depending on the city, you may not need to buy special trash bags. Instead, you may have to purchase city tax stickers (also available at the places listed above) to put on the regular trash bags before they will be collected.

The waste disposal guide will provide detailed information and list the shops where you can buy all things related to your trash needs. Because after all, nothing is free in Switzerland – not even trash.

Newspapers, paper and cardboard

OK, well maybe I spoke too soon. Paper items are picked up free of charge in most communities about once every six weeks. However, you must bundle and put them out correctly, or they will not be picked up and you will be left a note of shame, pasted on top stating what you did wrong.

You must tie paper securely in bundles no more than eight inches (about 20 centimetres) thick, and you must bundle paper and cardboard separately. You can buy string at the grocery store. Or if, like me, you get desperate the night before collection, you can always resort to thread. Either tie the neatest stacks you can, or hide your less-than-Swiss stacks under other people's.

If you have little patience for tying tidy, uniform stacks of paper, you could also cut down on the volume of paper you acquire by pasting a sticker on your mailbox indicating you do not wish to receive advertisements.

Also, stores like IKEA will accept empty packing boxes, and most movers like Harsch Transports or Packimpex – which even supports a tree-planting programme to make up for environmental damage caused by packing materials – will come back to collect unwanted boxes, as well.

Kitchen leftovers

Banana peels, apple cores, tealeaves, coffee grounds, eggshells – you name it, you can compost it.

In Baden, for example, there are personal green buckets available for such items. Depending on the size of your green bucket, you pay a yearly fee anywhere from SFr 25 to SFr 450 for a bucket sticker and then you put the bucket out to be emptied every Wednesday. If there is no special collection or local bin in your area, you can either attempt to compost it yourself, or use the regular trash collection as a last resort. You can typically buy the stickers at your town's tourist information centre or city hall.

PET plastic bottles & batteries

PET drink bottles and batteries must be returned to your local grocery store and placed in the appropriate collection containers. So either drink only tap water, or long live the bag lady lifestyle.

Plastic soap containers, vinegar bottles, vitamin bottles, etc. can unfortunately not be recycled in most towns at this time. They should be disposed of in the regular trash or re-used creatively.

Glass and cans

Recycle glass items at the glass drop near-

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est you, provided by most communities. Check your trash guide for locations. Typically you must sort glass by colour, since there are usually separate deposits for green, clear and brown glass. If you're unsure of the colour of your glass (trust me, this happens), put it with the browns.

Generally, receptacles for recycling canned food and soda cans are located in the same spot. Be aware that you may be scolded if you recycle at times not deemed appropriate (like Sundays, or after 20:00), so check the times posted.

Clothing/towels/bed sheets/shoes

There are a few options for disposing of these items:

- Most towns provide collection bins for textiles and shoes. Often these bins are marked to show exactly which charity the items will go to. For example, Texaid is a partnership of six charities (including the Swiss Red Cross and Caritas) that collects and recycles used textiles. Just put your items in a bag and deposit it in the bin, which is usually located near the glass and can recycling bins. Make sure your items are still wearable. (Whether someone would want to wear them is another story.) Otherwise, you can deposit them in the regular trash.
- Community pick-up days. For example, Baden schedules five pick-ups a year for these items. Items are collected for charitable purposes, similar to the organisations that benefit from the collection bins in town. Check your trash guide for dates.
- Various charities also collect these items. Some will leave bags in your mailbox that state which day they will pick up the items you leave out.
- Donate unwanted items to second-hand stores like the nationwide *Heils-Armee's Brocki/Brocante* (a list of Brockenhaus locations can be found at: www.brocki.ch).
- Try selling items to a consignment shop and be amazed at what they will pay for your 'foreign' Levis. Some stores to consider:
  - Inkognito, Ober Altstadt 28, Zug
  - Divinas, Höschgasse 52, Zurich (www.divinas.ch/Divinas)
  - La Fringue-Halle, Rue de Zurich 2, Pâquis (www.caritas-geneve.ch/depots-vente)
  - Portobello Market, Cheneau de Bourg 8, Lausanne (www.portobellomarket.ch)

Talking trash: expats dish on their Swiss trash adventures

"Heed the rules! I cavalierly decided to recycle some glass on a Sunday (at the big outdoor blue bins). Someone came out and scolded me. Have lived in fear of the recycling police ever since. Also, have known people who violated the trash placement rules. They were given a fine. It's serious stuff." – *Jessica Gains, Zurich*

"I got called to the police station to identify photos of my trash. (Yep, they went through it, and that's when I had two cats! That was a lot of poop to sift through.) My crime: putting it on the curb a day early. The fine: SFr 200. So my advice is to not put it out early (it's not supposed to be on the curb before 7:00 on the assigned trash day in my town)!" – *Cathleen Drilling, Adliswil*

"I sort and store and then swear when I miss the recycling days or forget to take it with me shopping. Doh!"
– *Jessica Cartwright, Urdorf*

"Be sure to rip anything with your name on it into little teeny illegible pieces in case you should accidentally break any of the rules, because then there will be no evidence pointing to you! I have also put my cardboard out in a way that was somehow unsatisfactory, returned from work in the evening, and sheepishly picked up my stack and brought it back into the apartment to re-pack when it wasn't picked up." – *Anneliese Herzog, Zurich*

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- Sell items at a flea market, though typically, you must first be the proud owner of a seller's permit. (Ask about obtaining one at your town hall, but be prepared to pay.) Many of Switzerland's larger cities have monthly or even weekly flea markets. Here are some websites to get you started:

  - Bern (www.marktbern.ch)
  - Geneva (www.geneve-tourisme.ch)
  - Lucerne (www.stadtluzern.ch/default.aspx?pageid=2012)
  - Zurich (www.bürkliplatz.ch/flohmarkt/index.html)

Electronic appliances

These can be returned to the place of purchase (like Fust, Interdiscount, Media Markt, etc.). There is typically no charge for disposal, and especially not if you have the original receipt. Alternatively, you can donate working items to second-hand stores or sell them at a flea market.

Large items

Burnable items too large for regular trash bags (i.e. beds, sofas, chairs, tables, rugs, etc.) can usually be collected at the same time as regular trash, but you will need tax stickers. The number of stickers will be based on size and weight of the item. Check with your town hall or consult your trash disposal guide to determine the number of stickers needed.

As a general guide, one sticker is appropriate for items 25 kilograms and less with a maximum size of 70 x 70 x 120 centimetres. Two stickers are needed for items between 25 kilograms and 50 kilograms with sizes up to 70 x 100 x 200 centimetres.

If all this is too complicated and the stuff is still usable, you can donate it to a second-hand store (they will usually pick items up free of charge if they are in good condition). You can also try selling them through online forums like www.ebay.ch or www.ricardo.ch, or at a flea market.

Or as a last resort, many people put unwanted items on the curb with a note inviting others to take them for free.

Hazardous waste

When it is possible, return unused paint, cleaning products, chemicals, etc. to the place of purchase. Drug stores often accept up to five kilograms of hazardous waste. Otherwise, regional waste disposal plants will take these items for a fee. Again, consult your trash guide for locations near you.

Scrap metal

Most communities have a bin for small metal items like screws, nails, pans, jar lids, cutlery, etc. Some places also collect these items together with cans.

For large metal items like grills, chairs and bicycles, most towns provide one scheduled pick-up a year as well as a location where they can be dropped off free of charge.

For bikes, there is often a separately scheduled bike exchange day once a year, as well as yearly bike markets (*velobörsen/bourses aux vélos/bicicletta di cambio*). As you may have guessed, the trash guide will tell you all.

Christmas trees

Many towns will pick up Christmas trees at no cost. So before you resign yourself to looking at your poor tree for months on end out on the patio, check your trash disposal guide. Often the information will be listed with the garden waste details.

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