

STEEL THIS: AMERICA'S FAVORITE RECYCLABLE

Steel is a versatile material that most of us use in our everyday lives without giving it a second thought. A variety of products come in steel cans (what most of us think of as “tin cans”): coffee, fruits, vegetables, soups, sauces, juices, pet food, cleaning products, paints and others.

Cans are made primarily of steel with a thin coating of tin (weighing less than 1 percent of the can) to prevent rust and protect the flavor and quality of the food inside. Food has been packaged in tin-coated steel cans since the 1800s. Today, Americans use 100 million of them every day – enough to run a steel pipeline from the East Coast to the West Coast and back again.

In addition to their popularity and usefulness, steel cans are also recyclable. Steel is North America's most recycled material, more than aluminum, paper, glass, and plastic combined. In 2005, nearly two-thirds of all steel cans used in the United States were recycled.

Recycling a steel can couldn't be much easier than it already is. It's no longer necessary to remove the labels or crush the can. All you need to do is empty it, place the lid inside, and place it in your recycling bin. Some municipal recycling programs even accept empty steel aerosol and paint cans, which can easily be recycled as long as they are empty.

After they are collected from the curb in municipal recycling programs or drop-off locations, steel cans are trucked to material recovery facilities (MRFs) or processing plants. There, they are magnetically separated from other recyclables, crushed into large cubes called bales, and shipped to steel mills or foundries. There they are melted down and used in the manufacture of new steel products.

Recycled steel cans are made into new cars, girders for buildings, or new food cans. In the U.S., steel cans and other steel products contain at least 25 percent recycled steel, with some containing nearly 100 percent.

Using old steel to make new steel also saves landfill space, natural resources and energy. Recycling one ton of steel conserves 2,500 pounds of iron ore, 1,400 pounds of coal, and 120 pounds of limestone. Over the course of a year, steel recycling saves enough energy to power 18 million average homes for a full year.

THE ABC's of RECYCLING AT SCHOOL