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The Green Home: Recycling Gadgets When They Go Pffft...

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AMERICANS discarded 2.25 million tons of computers, printers, cellphones and other electronics in 2007. About 82 percent ended up in landfills. The Green Home called up Jason Linnell, the executive director of the National Center for Electronics Recycling, a nonprofit group based in West Virginia, to find out how we can recycle our old gadgets instead.

The average American household has 24 electronic devices, according to the Consumer Electronics Association. And each will eventually get thrown out or be replaced. Can all those gadgets be recycled?

Yes, unless you have a prehistoric television with a wood console around it. Most household electronics can be recycled because they have metal and other materials that are of value to recyclers. But the longer you hold on to your device, the less of a chance it has of being reused.

Really, how come?

If it's still working, the device can be given to someone in need. Or, if the item utilizes current technology, the working parts can be resold and installed into other devices. But if it's just gathering dust in your closet, the materials are not being put to productive use.

Where should people take their old electronics?

It depends on where you live. Some towns and cities sponsor drop-off centers or periodic collection events. You can find information about where to go at our Web site, electronicsrecycling.org. Other sites include MyGreenElectronics.org, which is sponsored by the Consumer Electronics Association and allows searches by ZIP code, and Earth911.com, a public-private partnership that lets you search by type of electronic and address.

What if there are no recycling centers nearby?

Several big chain stores, including Best Buy and Staples, allow you to drop off most small electronics for recycling. Manufacturers are starting to offer recycling, too. Apple, Dell, Samsung, Sony and others now offer free recycling either through mail-in programs or at drop-off sites specified on their Web sites.

Are all these services free?

Most are. But certain components, like cathode ray tubes, are difficult and costly to recycle, so you should expect to pay anywhere from \$5 to \$20 to recycle an old TV or monitor. Also, you may have to do some hunting to find a place that will take them. A good place to start is a Web site like Earth911.com.

What's preventing people from simply throwing an old television in the trash, where it ends up in a landfill?

Nothing. In most states, it's perfectly legal for households to dump electronics in the regular trash, even though items like TVs and computer monitors are classified as hazardous by the federal government.

Hazardous?

Cathode ray tubes have a significant amount of lead, which has been shown to leach.

What about the batteries that power our gizmos? They contain heavy metals which are as bad, if not worse, for the environment.

There is a national recycling program for rechargeable batteries; Sears, Staples, Target, RadioShack, Best Buy, the Home Depot and Lowe's are participants. But no one has figured a way to make it worthwhile to recycle regular alkaline batteries.

I understand why no one wants my old TV. But what about an iPod that recently died. Can I make money from recycling it?

There are a growing number of Web sites that will actually pay you for old gadgets including Techforward.com, Gazelle.com and MyBoneyard.com. Indicate the type of product you have and its condition, and the sites will tell you how much they'll pay for it. And, of course, there's eBay.

Is there a better way to keep gadgets out of the landfill?

Try repairing them. Or resist the urge to constantly upgrade. Reusing a device is the highest form of recycling.

Interview conducted, edited and condensed by Julie Scelfo.

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