

Making Ripples

Pizza Box Recycling Myth

by Amanda Bancroft

Who doesn't love pizza? It comes in a variety of shapes and sizes with colorful toppings and globe-trekking flavors that don't stop with Italian. Pizza can match one's carnivorous personality or adhere to any dietary restrictions like veganism. Although pizza boxes are great for carrying hot pizzas to our doorstep, they aren't so great for the recycling center. That's right: used pizza boxes are not necessarily recyclable.

No matter what you may have heard on campus, just because something is made out of cardboard does not make it acceptable for recycling centers to process into new products. In the case of pizza boxes, the unused corrugated cardboard box by itself would be safe to recycle, but the grease stains and gooey cheese from our pizzas contaminate recycling streams and make it harder for anyone to recycle anything that ends up mixed in a batch with used pizza boxes.

Greasy boxes contaminate the recycling stream because paper is mixed with water to create a slurry at the recycling center. Oil residue from the boxes can rise to the top of the slurry and compromise the whole batch when the paper fibers can't be separated out.

One trick for getting around throwing the whole pizza box away is to simply rip off the (supposedly) clean top and just toss the bottom in the trash, recycling only the top and making sure it's free of coupon stickers or adhesives. Another idea is to cut up the greasiest or cheesiest parts of the box and add them to your compost pile, although it's debatable whether small quantities of dairy products are ok for composting piles. Grease can cause bad smells and attract rodents, but tiny fragments of pizza box might be fine for your backyard composting pile.

If you're lucky, when you open a pizza box that has been carefully handled, you can simply remove the paper mat under the pizza (if the restaurant has included one) and recycle the box. However, there are plenty of times when you receive a delivery of pizza that looks as though it were transported by a bucking bronco, and all hope of redeeming the pizza box is lost.

Different cities have different recycling or composting regulations for pizza boxes, but most of them don't permit it. Denver, Colorado is lenient, and allows slightly soiled boxes to be recycled if all the food is scraped out and grease stains are minimal. San Francisco encourages composting pizza boxes. According to the City of Fayetteville, "Pizza boxes are recyclable, but please remove leftover food scraps from the boxes." If they're too greasy and soiled, it could compromise the batch. Learn more about what you can and can't recycle by checking with your local municipality.

Amanda Bancroft is a Master Naturalist and volunteers with her husband Ryan for their solar-powered online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.