

A Recycling Aid

Written by Tang Yau-yang

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My children used to throw the garbage directly into the trash can. That was a few years ago before I began making the first generation of bag-and-rack sets for sorting and collecting recyclables. Each rack holds a cloth bag open and upright to serve as a receptacle for a designated type of recyclable item. This rectifies the nagging problem that plastic bags sag and won't stay upright, which looks awful in a house. When the bags stand upright, it also makes it easier to label them and deposit things in them.

I put a set in my home, each bag color-coded for plastic, paper, metal cans, and glass. Before long my children were depositing all kinds of things that they used to throw into the garbage.

But when I offered the apparatus to my friends, I was humbled by their reactions, like: "You're kidding me. Where in my home can I find space for these bulky racks?" "I don't want to collect garbage in my living room." "Unsanitary." And "I don't want them."

Well, the thing could have used an improvement or two. So I used steel instead of wood for the frame to slim the apparatus down. Then I urged my colleagues and some Tzu Chi volunteers to try them. They told me that even five-year-olds knew how to use them. I was encouraged to hear their feedback. The new apparatus, once it got in people's home, proved to be beneficial as it reminded people to classify garbage and reclaim reusable resources.

However, there was still a major drawback with the second version: its higher financial and environmental costs. The cloth and steel frame were not only more costly, but also more resource-intensive due to the use of new materials. We could not afford the monetary cost to get more people to use it, nor did we want to use new resources and inflict new wounds on the earth, especially in the name of recycling.

After consultation with several volunteers, I decided to switch to recycled materials for both the bags and the racks. Thankfully some caring business and individual sponsors came through with the necessary items and work venues. All this and the hard work of many volunteers ushered in the third generation of bags and racks.

We promoted the set to schools, communities, and businesses. We urged people to put their garbage into the proper bags. A few seconds of mindful garbage sorting at this point could save much time and trouble later. Volunteers at Tzu Chi recycling stations were able to process more of the incoming recyclables as such without first "separating grain from chaff" to remove any unusable garbage.

Thanks to the help of many people and businesses, the bag-and-rack program is off to an encouraging start. I hope that this program and other parts of the Tzu Chi recycling program will go on forever to help sustain the earth and leave a cleaner and healthier environment to posterity. Use **The Bag-and-Rack Set**

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"Repair, reuse, make do, and don't throw anything away" was a motto during the Great Depression. The motto is as appropriate now as it was then. If more people on earth had followed that timeless advice since then, we wouldn't have such a big environmental mess on our hands now.



Several businesses donate empty bags to the Tzu Chi bag-and-rack program. Those bags used to hold sugar, flour, plastic, or some such bulk items. Many of the bags come in partially opened, only enough to empty the bag's contents, but leaving most of the sealing thread still firmly sewn to the sack. Volunteers need to untangle the thread and pull it off the bag to open each bag completely. After this, the bags are washed, hung to dry, folded, and sewn to size before they are sent to be further processed.

The re-sized bags are fitted on the racks, and two carrying handles are added to the top of the bag. Each bag is stenciled to indicate the kind of recyclables, such as paper or PET bottles, that it is designated to contain. Now the bag-and-rack set is ready to be given out for people to take home or take to the office to put their good, reusable garbage in.

Some electronics companies donate their scraps: sections of plastic that look like hollow I-beams. Volunteers use pliers to remove the steel clevis pins on some of the plastic sections. Then the sections are cut into either of two desired lengths, for the legs and for the shorter, horizontal bars that connect the legs at the bottom and the top. Holes are then drilled to make it easier to fasten the plastic sections together. A supporter donated 30,000 sets of nuts and bolts to hold the pieces together.

Once the plastic sections are fastened together, the rack is capable of standing free, ready to hold up the bag..

By Sim Boon Peng

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