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Waste Disposal and Recycling — Mülltrennung in Germany

How waste separation works in Germany: which waste goes in which bin, the deposit system, and bulk waste disposal.

Deutsche Begriffe: Mülltrennung | Recycling | Gelber Sack | Biotonne | Restmüll | Sperrmüll | Pfand

Why Mülltrennung?

Germany is the **world champion in recycling** — and that's thanks to strict Mülltrennung. As a resident, you are **obligated** to separate your waste properly. Mülltrennung conserves resources, reduces CO₂ emissions, and saves disposal costs.

In your apartment or house, there are several **waste bins** ready to use. Which bins you have and how often they are emptied depends on your **city and landlord**.

Waste Bins Overview

□ Blue Bin — Paper and Cardboard

- Newspapers, magazines, catalogs
- Cardboard boxes and packaging
- Books (without plastic covers)
- Envelopes (even with windows)
- Writing paper, school notebooks

DO NOT PUT IN: coated paper, wallpaper, soiled paper (e.g., greasy pizza boxes), photos

☐ Yellow Bin / Yellow Sack — Packaging

- Plastic packaging (yogurt cups, films, bags)
- Drink cartons (Tetra Pak)
- Cans and tinned goods
- Aluminum foil and aluminum containers
- Styrofoam packaging
- Toothpaste tubes

DO NOT PUT IN: toys, CDs, coat hangers, flower pots (only packaging with the **Green Dot** or similar symbol)

☐/☐ Biotonne — Organic Waste

- Fruit and vegetable scraps
- Coffee grounds and tea bags
- Eggshells
- Garden waste (leaves, grass, flowers)
- Bread scraps
- Paper towels (unprinted)

DO NOT PUT IN: bones, meat (in many cities), cat litter, compostable plastic bags (not allowed in many cities)

● Restmülltonne — Everything Else

- Cigarette butts
- Diapers and hygiene products
- Vacuum cleaner bags
- Broken porcelain and ceramics
- Photos
- Soiled paper
- Small amounts of ash (cold!)

☐ Glass Container — Recycled Glass

Glass is separated by **color** into containers:

- **White/clear** — clear bottles and glasses

- **Green** — green bottles and glasses
- **Brown** — brown bottles and glasses
- **Blue or red glass** → into the green glass container

DO NOT PUT IN: drinking glasses, window glass, mirrors, ceramics, porcelain, light bulbs

Important: Glass containers have **deposit hours** (usually Mon–Sat, 7–8 PM). On Sundays and at night, you cannot deposit glass!

The Deposit System (Pfand)

Germany has a **deposit system** for beverage containers:

Packaging	Deposit
Single-use bottles (plastic, with deposit symbol)	€0.25
Single-use cans	€0.25
Reusable bottles (glass, beer)	€0.08
Reusable bottles (glass, water/lemonade)	€0.15
Reusable bottles (PET)	€0.15

How Does It Work?

- 1.** You buy a beverage and pay the **deposit** at the register
- 2.** You take the empty bottle/can to the **deposit machine** in the supermarket
- 3.** You receive a **receipt** that is credited at the register

Tip: You can recognize the deposit symbol on the bottle. Not all bottles have deposits — e.g., wine, juice in glass bottles, and spirits are often **deposit-free**.

Bulk Waste (Sperrmüll)

For large items that don't fit in bins, there is **Sperrmüll**:

- Furniture (cabinets, sofas, beds, tables)
- Mattresses
- Carpets
- Large household appliances (washing machine, refrigerator) — often **separate pickup!**

How Does Bulk Waste Pickup Work?

1. Schedule a pickup — online, by phone, or via form with your waste management company

2. Prepare bulk waste — on the agreed date in front of your house (at the curb)

3. Pickup — the waste management company collects the items

Costs: In many cities, bulk waste pickup is **free 1-2x per year**. After that or for larger quantities: **€20-100** per pickup.

Alternatives

- **Recycling center / Wertstoffhof** — You bring items yourself (often free)
- **eBay Kleinanzeigen** — give away or sell usable furniture
- **Social thrift store** — donates well-maintained furniture to those in need

Electronic Waste (E-Waste)

Electronic devices must **NOT** go in household trash:

- Smartphones, tablets, laptops
- Cables, chargers
- Toaster, blender, hair dryer
- Energy-saving bulbs, LED lamps
- Batteries and accumulators

Where to Take Them?

- **Recycling center** — free disposal
- **Electronics stores** — stores with 400+ m² of floor space must accept small old devices (under 25 cm) for free
- **Supermarkets** — since 2022, also accept small electronic devices (from 800+ m² sales area)
- **Batteries** — collection boxes in every supermarket and drugstore

Common Mistakes

- 1. Pizza boxes in the blue bin** — No! Greasy paper goes in Restmülltonne
- 2. Diapers in Biotonne** — No! Restmülltonne

3. Deposit bottles in glass container — You're losing money! Take them to the machine

4. Electronic devices in household trash — Forbidden! Take them to recycling center or store

5. Leaving trash next to the bin — Possible fine (€10–€5,000, depending on city)

Waste Disposal Costs

As a tenant, you pay waste fees through **utility costs**. They depend on:

- **Bin size** (120 l, 240 l, 1,100 l)
- **Emptying frequency** (weekly, every two weeks)
- **City/municipality**

Typical costs: **€150-400/year** per household (included in utility costs).

Daily Tips

- **Small trash cans** in the kitchen — one for Restmülltonne, one for packaging, one for bio
- **Paper bag** for Biotonne — prevents odor and moisture
- **Collect deposit bottles** — it's worthwhile, especially at €0.25 per bottle
- **Use an app** — many cities have a waste disposal app with emptying dates and waste guides