

Cork Recycling

What is Cork?

Cork is a natural product, the bark of the Cork Oak tree, and is formed at the rate of 1.5mm per year and to a thickness of 60mm. When the tree reaches a circumference of 800mm the cork can be harvested.

A cork tree is first harvested when it is 25 years old and, by law the tree is only allowed to be stripped only once every 9 years. Cork from the first two harvests is used to make products such as insulation and floor tiles. Only the third harvest is smooth and regular enough for wine corks.

Stripping the bark does not harm the tree.

Sustainable Production

All of the cork bark is used in production—nothing is wasted. As cork waste is generated in the production process, it is granulated and returned into the process. Even the fine particles of cork dust are collected and used as fuel to heat the factory boilers.

Bark from the tree's first two harvests (known as virgin and secondary bark) is used to make cardboard insulation and cork tiles.

Cork from the third and subsequent harvests (known as reproduction cork) is used for whole cork products, principally stoppers, and a range of granulated cork products, including notice boards, gaskets, hockey and gold balls and floor tiles.



Cork is also combined with rubber for gaskets, valves and insulation in buildings and railways. It is even found in the nose cone of the space shuttle.

More than 50% of the cork bark goes into stoppers, including natural wine corks. Champagne corks, Twin Top corks, bar-top corks for fortified wines and spirits, and small corks for other uses.



Left: harvesting the cork at the Portuguese Cork Forest



Right: A cork tree after its bark has been harvested

Why Recycle Cork?

As mentioned previously, much cork is recycled within the production process. The recycling of cork stoppers after use is also well established, particularly in Australia and Portugal.

Each year, an estimated 30 tonnes of corks are collected for recycling in Australia. A voluntary organisation called 'Guides Australia' collects and sorts used wine corks from hotels, restaurants, wineries, clubs, hospitals and individuals in all states and territories. There are also collection points in Body Shop outlets.

The corks are transported to a Melbourne-based manufacturer of products made from recycled cork. The corks are granulated and turned into engine gaskets, cricket and hockey balls, industrial safety mats, boat decking and floors for horse floats.

Although the recycling of cork is a well established practice in countries such as Australia and Portugal, the UK does not yet have a dedicated scheme for recycling cork, although Amorim is currently working on developing a UK nationwide scheme for the collection of spent corks.

A pilot scheme ran during 2000 by Amorim, in conjunction with the UK Guide Association to collect natural wine corks. All corks collected were sent to a central warehouse, near Heathrow, for dispatch to Portugal, where they were recycled for re-use in the making of cork products such as insulation, tiles and pin boards.

This scheme, although very successful, has since ceased, and an international generic campaign for cork run by APCOR (Portuguese Cork Association) has been launched.

Fascinating Facts

In addition to its ecological value, the cork oak is truly remarkable because every part of the tree serves some useful economic purpose.

For example:

- The acorn of the cork tree, as well as being used for propagation, is used as animal fodder and as a source of cooking oils;
- The leaves of the trees are used as fodder and as a natural fertiliser;
- Tree cuttings and decrepit trees provide firewood and charcoal. Various chemical products are made from the tannins and natural acids contained within the wood.

However, the most valuable part of the tree is the bark, used for making myriad cork products.



Links:

Amorim

www.amorimcork.com

A company dedicated to promoting the use and recycling of cork.

Stratsplace

www.stratsplace.com/how_corks.html

Lists the options available for reusing your Corks.