

Over the Back Fence  
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## **A matter of measurement**

By Alva Wood

The village's introduction of automated garbage pickup has been a qualified success. Instead of a human emptying garbage cans into a truck by hand, a pair of mechanical arms reaches out the side of the truck and does the same job.

There have been a few minor glitches, though.

Most householders have finally figured out what the three bins are for.

The bin with a blue lid is for recyclable products – tin cans, newspapers and magazines, plastic bottles... The village had to install cameras in their trucks to stop people trying to sneak fossilized paint cans of 24-volume sets of encyclopedias into their recycling bin.

The green lid is for yard waste. Not kitchen slops. Or dog poop, even if it was gathered in the yard.

The green bins don't get used as much as the others. Most people here have their own compost piles somewhere in a back corner of their yards. They don't see why they should turn their organic waste over to someone else to turn into mulch that they can buy back at \$35 a yard.

The black bin is for everything else. Including dog poop and Reader's Digest Condensed Books. Provided they're double bagged so that the video camera can't tell what 's inside.

The booklet handed out with the bins instructed, "Place carts on the street with wheels against the curb, if there is one" On most village roads, there isn't. So some cans get parked on the blacktop. Some in the ditch. Even a few on people's lawns.

But the biggest problem has been which bins to put out, which week. Black garbage gets picked up every week. The green and blue bins are picked up alternate weeks. But few people can remember which week is which.

So some put out all three bins every week. Others hold periodic neighbourhood conference to decide whether this is a green-bin or a blue-bin week. A few just copy whoever puts their bins out first.

The instruction booklet also said, "Leave at least one meter of clearance between each cart and any obstacles such as parked cars, poles, mailboxes, etc."

Apparently a lot of people don't know what a metre is.

When the program first started, Ronnie Burkholder was driving the garbage truck. If cans were too close together, Ronnie had to climb down from his cab, move the bins apart by hand, get back in the truck, and finally operate the automated arms to dump the bins.

He left yellow post-it notes instructing people to leave enough space between.

Some did. Others did nothing.

Ronnie started knocking on offenders' doors at 7:00 a.m. when he came around. The owners came to the door, bleary eyed, unshaven, in their pyjamas or less. Ronnie explained that he needed a metre between bins so that his truck's mechanical arms could reach out to grab the bins.

"What kind of meter?" one puzzled homeowner asked. "A gas meter? A water meter? An electric meter?"

Ronnie tried to explain that a metre was a measurement of distance.

"We're from Red Deer," the man apologized. "We don't have those things in Alberta."

"Didn't you get a booklet explaining all this?" asked Ronnie.

"Don't think so," came the reply. "We're only here a couple of months a year, for the lake, and the skiing."

Ronnie felt baffled. He's never known anything but metric measures. He wasn't even born when Pierre Trudeau pushed Canadians to measure in metres instead of yards, and temperatures in Celsius instead of Fahrenheit.

Ronnie tried to remember how his father Sam talked about the old days. "It's the same as one yard," he explained desperately. "I need your bins to be one yard apart!"

Finally, they seemed to understand.

The next week, when Ronnie came around, one of their bins was at the eastern corner of their yard. The other one was at the western corner.

Exactly one yard apart.