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Glass act

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SAN FRANCISCO – Tucked in an odd-shaped parcel of port property between railroad tracks and cargo ships sits a slice of inspiration.

At the Red Shovel Glass Co., trash becomes treasure. Tons of discarded bottles, otherwise rejected by recyclers, find new life as brightly colored "stones," perfect for paths and garden decoration.

Broken mirrors, unwanted doors and windows, chipped dishes and glass tabletops, fallen roof tiles, smashed flowerpots: All are reborn into polished pebbles.

Tumbled smooth, the finished products sparkle like gems in colors rare in nature but common in trash bins.

"All this stuff would otherwise end up in landfills," explains Matthew Levesque, who oversees Building REsources and Red Shovel Glass Co., its recycled-glass offshoot.

This nonprofit operation grew out of materials that couldn't otherwise be recycled. That includes an awful lot of colored or tempered glass.

Open to the public as a subsidiary of San Francisco Community Recyclers, Building REsources started about 15 years ago with building discards – doors, windows, plumbing and lighting fixtures, and other reusable castoffs – culled from San Francisco trash.

"This city is constantly rebuilding itself," Levesque says. "We have no shortage of these materials."

In a year, about 1,000 tons of material, including the glass, are diverted from landfills through Building REsources.

Levesque, a poet turned manager, found beauty in these everyday items and started playing around with ideas.

"I encourage everyone to have fun," he says. "If you get a crazy idea, try it."

On their repurposed oasis, he and his staff create whimsical gardens and sculptures of found items to inspire potential customers. All the plants are orphans, too, thrown out by former owners.

"This has a lot in common with poetry," Levesque says during a tour of his gardens. "Poetry is very analogical. Something is like something else. Here, an old sink is like a flowerpot, so why not make it a flowerpot?"

Plastic foam packaging coated with stucco becomes a fantasy fishpond. Strips of fiberglass skylight form a curvy chandelier. Rusted gates turn into trellises. A toolbox and a truck axle resurface as a cactus box garden and a patio table.

When it came to a mountain of discarded blue vodka bottles about five years ago, Levesque had a poetic revelation. Why not polish the glass like agates and use it to pave paths?

"It was another 'aha!' moment," he recalls.

And Red Shovel Glass Co. was born. But besides the product, these inventive recyclers had to come up with a way to make it.

"There's no source for recycled bottle polishers in the phone book," he says. "We had to come up with our equipment, too. And we wanted to make it as energy-efficient as possible. And do it without a budget. Then, I saw a cement truck drive by – and the idea light went on again."

After trying conventional rock tumblers, Levesque settled on souped-up 55-gallon cement mixers that can polish a batch of glass or ceramics in one to two days. Sludge with glass grains from previous batches is used as an abrasive.

"It reminds me of glass I used to pick up on the beach at Lake Erie," says technician Jennifer "Angel" Gurgovits, a longtime artist and Red Shovel's tumbling master. "It's smooth from the waves and so pretty."

Different glass and materials turn into distinctive final products. Glass tabletops make up larger light-blue "River Rocks." Tempered glass doors and windows make cubelike pale-blue crystals. Wine bottles go into the olive-green "Chardonnay."

"I like the Beach Blend," she says as she fingers a barrel of glass in rainbow hues. "This started with broken glass swept off our floor. All these random things you find are in this mix."

Much of the material comes from alcohol bottles and architectural glass. Art glass comes from glass-blowing studios.

The cobalt-blue glass (mostly from water and liquor bottles) looks similar to the glass paving along Interstate 5 in downtown Sacramento. The freeway contractors used sharp-edged chopped glass.

"We tumble our glass until it's smooth enough for a 2-year-old to play with," Levesque says.

Some specific beverage brands turn into unique products. For example, the bottoms of Grey Goose vodka bottles create uniform glass discs.

Wine bottles work great (and are abundant), but beer bottles are too thin and brittle for tumbling.

"This is much more efficient than conventional recycling," Levesque notes. "To melt glass, you've got to heat it to 2,000 degrees. That takes a lot of energy."

With an exclusively Northern California market, Red Shovel sells two to three tons of its unusual finished material a month. A ton of the Chardonnay mix, for example, represents about 2,000 wine bottles. In a landfill, those bottles would take 10,000 years or more to break down – if ever.

The material sells for as little as \$1.50 a pound and as much as \$8 a pound. For paving, 8 pounds of glass covers a square foot 1 inch deep. Five pounds of the terra-cotta mix, which is lighter than glass, covers a square foot. The material is often used in small amounts to great effect.

For now, the only place to get it is at Building REsources' home site in San Francisco's Bayview district.

"I would love to wholesale it," Levesque says. "But I never know what I'll get. Our supply is

dependent on other people's trash."

Red Shovel's recycled products are popping up in garden designs throughout Northern California. Designer Cheryl Buckwalter recently used them to form a blue pool at the base of a "waterless" fountain for a water-wise garden in Carmichael.

The recycled glass also was used for the same effect beneath a solar-powered fountain at the Roseville Utility Exploration Center.

"I'm always trying to think of more things to do with it," says landscape designer Nick Thayer, who has incorporated Red Shovel's product in several projects. "I see that material and think, 'That's really cool, but what am I going to do with it?' "

Thayer, of Ukiah-based Late Afternoon Garden Designs, has found many inventive uses, such as mixing the bright-blue glass with pea gravel for a splash of watery color. "It's a great effect," he says. "People always ask, 'What is that stuff?' "

He recently used the fine-grade recycled terra cotta – made from broken roof tiles – to fill in gaps in a sandstone patio. "The home had a terra-cotta roof, so it was perfect," he says.

For a design-show house with Michelle Kaufmann at the West Coast Green Conference in San Francisco, Thayer turned about 200 polished vodka bottle bottoms into a water feature that evoked a bed of clamshells. The crystal-blue chunks made from tempered glass filled a tub and mulched potted succulents. White ceramic chips became patio paving.

"I love the vodka bottle bases," Thayer said. "They look like clear hockey pucks. (The light-blue chunks) are great because they're like little ice cubes. They make you think of water. The ceramic chips have a nice crunch."

The designer plans to use some of the recycled ceramics and glass at a home garden he's designing in Grass Valley. More of the Red Shovel material will show up in a garden display he's creating for a major showcase, "The Late Show," coming in September at Sonoma's CornerStone Gardens.

"What I'm always looking for is something that's not just 'green' or recycled material, but something a little more interesting," Thayer says. "This is giving these items a second life. It's beautiful, but also all these other things – recycled, repurposed, energy-conscious. For me as a designer, it's disarming."

Levesque and his staff are tackling the next step: What to do with leftover sludge from tumbling glass?

"It sets up like concrete," Levesque says. "So why not use it like concrete?"

Embedded with bits of bright glass, the sludge has become the basis for whimsical one-of-a-kind paving stones. Once the process is perfected, Red Shovel will add the stones to its product line, probably sometime this summer.

If it's as popular as the tumbled glass, the steppingstones will pave the way to more success.

"This is a product they came up with on a whim," Thayer says of the recycled glass pebbles. "But that's what everybody wants. I love it."

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