Haven’t I seen you before, clear plastic sandwich container?

Most forward-thinking people embrace the idea of recycling plastic as a huge step towards the greening of our planet, and for some time plastic food containers have been crushed, melted, turned into pellets and then into everything from irrigation pipes to car-boot carpets and the fibre and duvets.

“Currently most of the trash we throw away is plastic that was once rubbish,” says Zyda Rylands, Woolworths’ director of environment SA. “We have a responsibility to manage this from cradle to grave. In other words, use it, recover it and, if possible, re-use and recycle it.”

Now the containers around Woolworths’ range of fresh sandwich ingredients — made of food-grade PET — are being recycled.

Recycling a ton of PET bottles not only saves 6.2m of landfill space, it also saves enough energy to keep a 15 -watt energy-saving light glowing for 24 hours.

Clearly more of the stuff needs to come off the dumps into the recycling units. But seeing the stuff in the form of clear plastic pellets, which is what recycling does, makes it clear to everyone that they can do something about it.

But seeing is believing, and Extrupet’s R10 million food-grade PET recycling plant goes to mind-boggling lengths to ensure that every microscopic speck of plastic that makes up the rPET destined for food packaging is pristine.

So much so that it’s the first recycler in the world to be certified by the British Retail Consortium - Extrupet chief operating officer Chandru Wadhwaani had the certificate hung up outside the unit just last week. His plant recycles 1.5 million bottles – a month.

Last week he took a small media group on a tour from the massive bales of crumpled, dirty bottles in the yard outside, through the manual, mechanised and computerised sorting and cleaning stages, on to the grinding and melting stages and finally to the emergence of blue and white flakes — in the case of the non-food grade rPET — and finery, shiny crystal-like beads in the case of the stuff that will go on to become food-grade rPET which makes up a third of the company’s total production.

If the recyclers had their way, only clear and blue PET bottles would be produced, with easy-to-peel polypropylene labels. PVC labels and lid liners are a no-no, says Wadhwaani, because instead of floating to the top of the water tank as polyprop does, they sink to the bottom and mingle with the PET, contaminating it.

“Shrink-wrap PVC labels are the biggest nightmare, because stripping them off is very labour intensive.”

Red, green and brown bottles are problematic for recycling plants, and thus fetch less money for the many thousands of people who earn a living collecting old bottles.

“We are talking to the manufacturers, trying to get them to help us by putting their products in bottles compatible with recycling, but it’s an uphill battle,” Wadhwaani said.

For the first time, a SA company is recycling plastic that can be used to package food items.