



GUIDE TO COMPOSTABLE/DECOMPOSABLE FOOD SERVICE PRODUCTS IN THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES

There are a wide variety of materials being used to manufacture compostable and/or decomposable food service products including: plates, bowls, cups, cutlery, clamshells and other take-out containers. These items are generally not recyclable, and are considered contaminants in the recycling waste stream. A product that has been carefully manufactured to degrade after use does not tend to recycle into a more durable product.

IF THESE COMPOSTABLE PLASTICS GET INTO THE RECYCLING STREAM, THEY CAN RUIN THE BATCH OF RECYCLED PLASTIC BEING PRODUCED. PLEASE DO NOT PLACE THEM IN THE GREEN OR THE BLUE RECYCLING BINS.

WHAT IS “COMPOSTABLE”?

The terms “compostable” and “biodegradable” mean different things. “Degradable” simply means that an item can be physically broken apart into smaller pieces. When used to refer to plastics, the term usually implies that the plastic item can be reduced to dust-sized or smaller pieces. “Compostable”, however, means that when the item completely degrades it becomes compost, a substance with a high percentage of organic content which includes plant nutrients in easily available form. All compostable items are degradable, but not all degradable items can become compost.

Items which claim to be compostable must meet one of the two ASTM standards: D6400 or D6868*, defining the conditions and time requirements under which an item must compost in order to be considered compostable. These are currently the only scientific, internationally accepted standards available. The ASTM standards specify longer composting and curing times (“full” composting) than most municipal or commercial facilities use. Unfortunately, at this time there are few compost facilities in the U.S. which operate with the conditions and time requirements that are needed to compost most items which meet ASTM standards.

The Biodegradable Products Institute (BPI) is an international association of government, industry, and academia stakeholders promoting the use and recycling of biodegradable materials. They issue certificates to products which have been independently tested in a BPI-certified laboratory, and have been found to meet one of the ASTM standards. Neither ASTM or BPI require these items to be tested in an actual working compost facility.

CAN WE REALLY COMPOST IT?

The City of San Diego recently tested a variety of compostable food service products in the compost facility which takes most of their green waste. According to the engineer overseeing the test, the great majority of the items had not significantly degraded by the end of the 10-week trial, leading the City to continue to ban compostable food service products from its green waste composting bins.

The City of Los Angeles and its contractors do not operate their composting/mulching facilities according to the conditions and time requirements specified by ASTM to completely break down items which meet ASTM’s D6400 or D6868 standards. The Lopez Canyon Environmental Center, the City’s largest mulching/composting facility, currently processes its mulch for 30 days, and its horse-manure compost for 60 days. This is not a long enough time period to compost most food service products. Most compostable food service products processed in mulch or compost piles operated by the City and/or its contractors will not break down into compost before the product is finished and transported to the end user.

HOW CAN WE TELL WHETHER OR NOT IT’S COMPOSTABLE?

In most cases, compostable and degradable food service products look very similar to non-compostable and degradable food service products. It may take a minute or two of inspection to determine which category an individual item falls into. Both the City’s own compost facilities and our contractors’ facilities, which sort the contents of the City’s blue bins, run at a rapid pace, making such detailed inspection impractical. Therefore, at this time all food service products are removed from both the green and the blue bins, and disposed of.

Below is a table of the major categories of ‘compostable’/’degradable’ food service products. **NONE OF THESE ITEMS SHOULD BE PLACED IN THE CITY’S GREEN BINS OR THE BLUE BINS.**

MATERIAL	DESCRIPTION
Corn Plastic (PLA)	(Polylactic acid.) Clear containers and liners for paper, marked as recycling ‘7’. Producing PLA uses 65% less energy than producing conventional plastics. It also generates 68% fewer greenhouse gases, and contains no toxins. These items are generally compostable in a commercial composting facility. DO NOT PLACE PLA ITEMS INTO THE GREEN OR BLUE BINS.
Sugarcane (bagasse)	Made of sugar production waste, so there is no need to grow any additional crop. These items are generally compostable in a commercial composting facility. Marked as recycling ‘7’ DO NOT PLACE BAGASSE ITEMS INTO THE GREEN OR BLUE BINS.
BioPlastics	Made of starch from corn, potato, tapioca, or other plants, instead of hydrocarbons, usually marked as recycling ‘7’. PLA (see above) is the most common type. Not all bioplastics are compostable. The time and conditions required to degrade and/or compost vary depending on the individual type of bioplastic used. DO NOT PLACE BIOPLASTIC ITEMS INTO THE GREEN OR BLUE BINS.
Molded Fiber	Cellulose-based, made of plant materials. Some are created from plant pulp, much like paper. Others are made of whole leaves and/or grass which are compressed with pressure and steam. If not coated, these items may be compostable in a backyard composter. DO NOT PLACE MOLDED FIBER ITEMS INTO THE GREEN OR BLUE BINS.

Please place ALL “Compostable” and “Biodegradable” Food Service Products into your BLACK trash bins.

*ASTM D6400: This specification covers plastics and products made from plastics that are designed to be composted in municipal and industrial aerobic composting facilities. The properties in this specification are those required to determine if plastics and products made from plastics will compost satisfactorily, including biodegrading at a rate comparable to known compostable materials. The purpose of this specification is to establish standards for identifying products and materials that will compost satisfactorily in commercial and municipal composting facilities.

ASTM D6868: Specification for Biodegradable Plastic Used as Coatings on Paper and Other Compostable Substrates, covers requirements for labeling materials and products that have a plastic film or coating attached to compostable components when the entire product is designed to be composted in municipal and industrial composting facilities.