

FAQs: Why Choose Compostable Products for Food Service

What is composting?

Composting is the natural breakdown of organic materials into high quality soil amendments in a controlled environment. Composting has numerous benefits. It increases the nutrient content in soils, helps soils retain moisture, reduces need for chemical fertilizers, suppresses plant diseases and pests, promotes higher yields of agricultural crops, regenerates poor soils, prevents methane emissions from landfills, manages erosion problems and storm water, and more.

While some government agencies and businesses do on-site composting, many more contract with commercial operations that collect and compost their food waste and “green” waste off-site. In addition, a growing number of residents are opting to compost their waste at home.

What is a compostable product?

Compostable products are capable of undergoing biological decomposition in a compost site. After a short period of time (depending on the product and the composting site), the product is not visually distinguishable. It also breaks down to carbon dioxide, water, inorganic compounds, and biomass at a rate consistent with those of known compostable materials (such as leaves).

Many compostable products are made of biobased materials derived from renewable agricultural and forestry resources such as corn, soybean, bamboo, sugarcane, grass, and cellulose. Popular products on the market include those made of biobased plastics (such as the corn-based polylactic acid or PLA) and bagasse (a sugarcane byproduct). Paper and molded pulp products may also be compostable if not coated with polyethylene plastic. In addition, there are fully compostable resins that are petroleum-based.

How can I tell that a product is compostable?

There are third-party certifications and logos to distinguish products that are compostable according to established industry standards. In North America, the Biodegradable Products Institute (BPI) is the third-party agency that determines if products are commercially compostable according to ASTM standards (the American Society of Testing and Materials).¹

BPI’s certification logo can be displayed on the actual product and packaging materials. To further indicate compostability, many products will have a green or brown stripe and/or the words “compostable” written on them. While purchasing only products that are third-party certified as compostable is strongly recommended, other products such as paper food service ware may be also be accepted by composters. Check with your local composter to determine what is acceptable. For a listing of products certified compostable in North America, visit the Biodegradable Products Institute web site at: <http://www.bpiworld.org/Certified-Bioedgradable-Foodservice-Items-Plates-Cups-Utinsels>.



Figure 1: BPI logo

How available are these products to meet food service needs?

There are a wide variety of compostable food service ware products available on the market: cups, plates, bowls, clamshells, cutlery, straws, gloves, trays, bottles, bags, boxes, coffee sleeves and sheets, hot and cold lids for paper and clear plastic cups, and various formats of food service ware including flexible and rigid packaging. There are many different brands to choose from for products in every category. Almost every disposable product has a compostable alternative that works as well as the traditional products. Test products to ensure they meet your performance needs.

How costly are these products?

Many factors affect the cost competitiveness of products: distribution, quantity, material, etc. For several years now, many compostable products have been price competitive with their paper counterparts. When compared to polystyrene foam (commonly known as Styrofoam), few products are price competitive. However, the rising cost of oil has increased the price of petroleum-based products, making compostables – which have become more “mainstream” in the market – increasingly competitive with traditional plastic products. In addition, food service operators may experience cost-savings from reduced collection areas and reduced trash hauling and tipping fees. At the Rose Garden Arena in Portland, Oregon, composting costs less than half of landfill disposal costs.

How are these products collected for composting?

One benefit of using compostable products in food service is that they enable food waste diversion. Food waste commingled with compostable packaging diverts one waste stream from landfills that was previously two waste streams. No cleaning or washing of the compostable products are needed for recovery. They can be put straight into the compost bin with any remaining food scraps; they will decompose together in a compost pile. Customer participation is an easy one-step process. Convenient access to properly labeled bins is a key to good participation.

Is it important that compostable products are composted?

Compostable products should end up at a commercial composting site that accepts compostable food service products. Line up a composter when making the switch to use these products and work with them to test products slated for use in order to ensure they will indeed compost in their system. Check out <http://www.findacomposter.com> to find a composter near you.

Who is using these products?

Compostable ware is used in a wide variety of food service operations from sit-down restaurants and university and hospital cafeterias to sports arenas and food service courts in airports. Safeco Field, the Mariner’s baseball stadium in Seattle, switched to compostable food service ware; this led to an overall \$70,000 reduction in waste disposal costs and a recycling/composting rate of 82 percent in 2010.² The San Francisco International Airport (SFO) requires the use of compostable tableware by all of its Terminal 2 food vendors to reach recycling rates of 75% in 2010 and 90% by 2020.



Figure 2: Buckhead, Atlanta Whole Foods Store. Picture courtesy of the Zero Waste Blog.



Figure 3: Picture courtesy of Trail Blazers, Portland, Oregon’s Pro Sports Team. Bins were designed by Rose Garden employees and custom built locally.

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1 Established in 1898, ASTM International provides a global forum for the development and publication of international voluntary consensus standards for materials, products, systems and services. Known for their high technical quality and market relevance, ASTM standards are used in research and development, product testing and quality systems.

2 Dan Sullivan, “Take Me Out to the Windrow,” *BioCycle*, December 2010, Vol. 51, No. 12, p. 22.