

Recycled vs. Biodegradable vs. Compostable



Recyclable? Biodegradable? Compostable?

It’s great that we have so many options besides throwing stuff in the trash, but even the experts sometimes get confused about what goes where!

Here’s some quick and simple points about what these mean and how to properly dispose of items in the most ecologically friendly way possible.

| | Recyclable | Biodegradable | Compostable |
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| What does it mean? | Recyclable products can be collected and reprocessed to produce new items. Recycling is very important in diverting waste from landfills. | Biodegradable means that a product will break down into carbon dioxide, water and biomass within a reasonable amount of time in the natural environment. | Compostable products are biodegradable, but with an added benefit: when they break down, they release valuable nutrients into the soil, aiding the growth of trees and plants. These products degrade within several months in an industrial composting facility and produce no toxic residues. |
| Common Items | Common recyclable materials are: paper, cardboard, plastic, glass, aluminum, and electronic waste. Visit Earth 911.org to view a list of products. | Biodegradability is a desirable feature in products such as cleaning agents. Conventional cleaning agents will often release harmful phosphates and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) as they break down, but biodegradable versions will not. | Compostability is a desirable feature in traditionally disposable products such as plates, bowls, cups and cutlery. These products are commonly made out of PLA (polylactic acid), bagasse (sugarcane fiber) or vegetable starch. It is environmentally preferable to use disposable products that are labeled “compostable” rather than just “biodegradable.” |
| How to dispose | The easiest way to recycle is through your municipal curbside garbage program, assuming such a program is available. Find out what sorts of materials are accepted through this program, and how the materials should be separated to ensure they are processed correctly. | Products that are labeled as biodegradable can be disposed of in your garbage. However it is important to remember that landfills lack the microorganisms and oxygen required for waste to biodegrade in a timely manner, so you should still try to minimize your use of items that are not recyclable or compostable. | Products that are labeled compostable should enter an industrial composting facility to fully degrade into organic matter. If your city has a composting facility, place these products in your compost collection bins to be picked up. If your city doesn’t provide industrial composting, you can dispose of compostable products in your backyard or home composter, but they will take longer to degrade. If you do not have access to a compost facility or a home composter, dispose of the compostables in the garbage. Do not put compostables into your recycling! They are not recyclable and will contaminate the recycling process. |