

LTT - Compostable Plastics – July 2021

Being a conscious consumer these days is a full time job. Not only are we researching about quality of what we're buying, but also what materials they are made of. We think about what will happen to our things when we no longer have a use for them. Are they reusable? Repairable? Recyclable? And what about the packaging they came in? Considerations about how much plastic to bring into our lives is often one of the main debates. Most of us wish petrochemical plastic wasn't such a big part of the picture and so when an alternative option appears, we want to explore it. More and more, biodegradable and compostable plastics are touted as the greener choice, but are they?

To begin with, biodegradable and compostable plastics are not the same thing. Biodegradable plastics can be derived from plant or petroleum based feedstock, or a mixture of both. While they can be broken down by fungi, bacteria or microbes, naturally occurring biodegradation can take years, decades, even centuries, possibly leaving behind toxic residue that doesn't enhance soil quality. Essentially, biodegradable means that something will break down into smaller pieces of itself, but not necessarily into food for soil.

Compostable plastics are manufactured from plant based materials (often corn) but are designed so that they look like conventional plastics made of fossil fuel. Ideally, they are designed for microorganisms to break them down into natural substances (organic matter, carbon dioxide and water) in a well-controlled composting environment within a predetermined time frame. When something is labeled Certified Compostable Plastic, it does not mean that it will compost just anywhere. It requires a high heat certified composting facility.

Industrial and commercial composting facilities control parameters such as temperature, carbon to nitrogen ration, humidity and air supply so that aerobic microorganisms decay the organic matter without leaving any toxic material behind. Even efficient composting takes two to six months to complete the process.

However, compostable plastics do not decompose at the same rate as other organic materials, i.e. household food waste, yard trimmings and soiled paper products. When treated in a municipal composting facility, household waste will degrade completely in 20 – 40 days. If we lived in the city and had green bins for our organic matter, we wouldn't be allowed to put compostable or biodegradable products in them. Along with plastic and metal, these are considered contaminants and have to be removed at the composting facility by sorting machines and human operators, a difficult process, since they are hard to tell apart from petrochemical plastics. Because most facilities don't yet meet the specific conditions for handling compostable plastic containers, straws, cups, bags and cutlery, these products are filtered out and sent to the landfill.

Until the infrastructure to deal with compostable plastic is in place, composting facilities can't deal with them. The physical durability of compostable plastic can also make for operational problems, jamming up equipment and causing undue wear and tear.

Compostable plastics also contaminate bales of recyclable plastic. The value of the bale is lost because compostable plastics don't behave like other plastics and can't withstand the recycling process.

Compostable plastics are not recommended for back yard composters because these bins are unlikely to get hot enough to break them down. In a commercial facility material is shredded, mixed, aerated and the environment is controlled. However, if you've tried and succeeded to compost these plastics, it is likely plastic shopping bags or paper coffee cups with compostable liners rather than more durable to-go utensils and straws. If you have had success, please let me know!

All this to say, that at this time, compostable and biodegradable plastics pose a problem to the recycling industry and composting facilities and so are bound for the landfill. Do they break down there? Possibly, depending on the aerobic conditions available. It may take years, decades, or longer, because landfills tend to block out air, moisture and sunlight, all the crucial elements for biodegradation.

Because of all these challenges, it's not recommended that businesses invest in the added expense of compostable plastic to-go wear. As always, bringing our own refillable containers is the best way to avoid having to make a decision around plastic vs compostable plastic. Vancouver Coastal Health has given the thumbs up for the safety of using refillable bags and containers so long as business owners adhere to regular rules of sanitizing. So, it's time to break out your favourite to-go mugs and reusable containers before your next shopping excursion or meal on the go happens.

~~**Trash Removal System:** July 14th, the second Wednesday of the month, 10 am until the barge is full is the regular trash removal day at the False Bay barge ramp. Any changes due to weather will be posted on the email list, FB Lasqueti Hotwire, and the Lasqueti website. No construction materials, renovation or demolition waste, prohibited waste, organics, recyclable material or stewardship materials. \$5 per bag, \$25 per average truckload. Mattresses and boxsprings \$15 each. Please call Mark if you have any questions about what constitutes acceptable garbage.~~

~~**Recycling Depot: Spring/Summer Hours April 1–October 31st**~~

~~Mondays 10 am – 2 pm, Thursdays 1 – 5 pm, Friday 10 am – 4 pm~~

~~Closed on Statutory Holidays. All recycling is monitored. Please bring it CLEAN and DRY and SORTED.~~

~~**Free Store: Spring/Summer Hours April 1–October 31st**~~

~~Monday 10 am – 2 pm and Thursday 1 – 5 pm~~

~~Please respect the signs. Practice social distancing. Drop donations during open hours so they can be quarantined. Ginja requests you drop off outstanding items only i.e. clean, usable clothing and household items. Please, NO food, garbage, recycling, TV's, soft foam, batteries, electrical devices, mattresses or hazardous materials ie: chemicals, fluorescent light tubes, prescription/non-prescription drugs, or pills in general.~~

~~**Recycle BC Website:** www.recyclebc.ca/what-can-i-recycle~~

~~**Return-It Beverage Depot open 24/7**~~

~~Front left of Free Store. Accepts refundable beverage containers: beer, cider, pop, coconut water cans, boxed wine cartons (leave them intact), water jugs and tetra juice packs. No milk containers and any kind of glass – please take these to the recycling depot.~~

~~If you have any questions, comments, suggestions for me and the Let's Talk Trash team please get in touch! jennyv@lasqueti.ca or 8604~~

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