



Compostable packaging – sort of

Many of us are aware of the impact of plastics in the environment. Blue Planet II in 2017, showed how plastics are affecting marine life. They also break down into very small particles that can get inside living cells. There's evidence that they can then disrupt the normal behaviour of cells and affect our health. So in the last few years, conventional plastic packaging has been replaced in part by compostable packaging, though only about 1 % of all packaging is actually compostable. We receive magazines wrapped in compostable envelopes, food comes in similar containers, we have carrier bags and even large electrical goods can be protected by compostable blocks. Unfortunately, some of these materials are not easily composted.

So you tear open that envelope labelled 'compostable' and put it into your green bin or perhaps you put it on your own compost heap down the garden. In both cases, that envelope doesn't compost very easily. In your garden, they may not break down at all: a 2022 study found that 60 % of packaging labelled 'home compostable' didn't breakdown at home. Even if they go to the recycling centre and are put into an industrial anaerobic digester, they are still hard to compost. In many cases, these



such so-called compostables will be removed from the waste stream and sent for incineration along with conventional plastics. And when they do breakdown, there can be residual chemicals that were incorporated into the material to give it the performance needed. In West Berkshire, both food waste and green waste are collected and processed in biodigesters. However, some councils do not allow this. 51 % of UK councils offer food waste collections but only 17 % allow mixed food and green waste. There's no national standard for dealing with compostable packaging.

As the use of compostable and similar materials (bioplastics, biodegradable plastics) increases, it still fails to address the issue of single use that applies to many conventional plastics. Instead of being reused, compostables are not recyclable and can only be disposed of as a contaminant in the waste stream. In fact, many, even most, conventional plastics can be recycled effectively. The problems with these is that the waste stream comprises too many different plastics and the recycling system is poorly developed.

Despite these drawbacks, the use of compostable packaging materials is increasing. But they are currently unregulated and how they should be disposed of is confused and confusing. There are standards that define their disposal and how quickly they breakdown in industrial treatment though many fail to meet the standards. For home composting, there are separate standards.

Compostable materials have unexpected environmental problems. In the USA in 2018, the Oregon Department of Environment Quality found that 76 % of compostables had a higher environmental impact in their manufacture than conventional plastics. The problem stems from the amount of land needed to grow the corn, sugar cane or potato used to make these materials as well as the water and agricultural chemicals. Soils become acidified, streams and lakes become polluted leading to dangerous algae blooms. During manufacture, chemicals are added to give flexibility. Some of these additives are ‘forever’ chemicals that persist almost indefinitely and can mimic hormones. At the end of their useful life, this packaging should be composted but if not, it can still form micro particles that have the same impact as those from conventional plastics.

How can we avoid some of these problems? We have become a throw-away society. We make short use of an item and then throw it into the rubbish. The same applies to compostable packaging. Instead, we should be using things that we can keep and re-use over and over again. For everyday, we use crockery, cutlery, glasses and dishes that we keep for a long time. If we have a party, we can try to use the same sorts of things rather than, say, paper plates. If you do want to use disposables, try things made of bamboo or sugar cane bagasse – plates, cutlery, drinking straws – which can be used several times before they have to be thrown away. Bamboo composts quite well. If you use compostable bags for food waste, instead there are paper bags that can stand the moisture and don’t have so many problems. In fact, you don’t need to use a liner at all – the food waste can go straight into the green caddy. If you receive magazines or other items in compostable envelopes, you could write to the supplier and urge them to switch to paper. Some of these can be extremely strong and still protect the contents.



We need to have clearer labelling of this packaging so consumers understand what they are and how to dispose of them. There needs to be more research to develop more environmentally friendly materials and instead of being single use, they should be useable over an extended period.

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We’d love to have some new members with new ideas to support our community. Contact the Cold Ash Parish Greening Group chair, Richard Marshall: marshalr@btinternet.com