

Biodegradable service-ware: Is it compostable?

Make sure biodegradable products get turned into soil! Research their true impact!

The following steps can help ensure that biodegradable service-ware (plates, cups, and cutlery) get turned into the soil rather than add to landfill waste.

Step 1: If my school purchases biodegradable service-ware, can it get composted?

If the service-ware does not get to the proper facility to be composted it ends up in landfill, or even worse, these products end up contaminating recycling processes.

MYTH: Biodegradable products simply break down in the landfill.

FACT: Barely anything biodegrades in a landfill because materials need light and oxygen to degrade which is usually absent from well-managed municipal landfills!

TAKE ACTION! Research—Find out if your board’s waste haulers can accept the biodegradable items you are considering purchasing for your school. If the hauler can accept these items, list any special requirements for separation/collection. Also, ensure that your waste hauler can get these items to the right facility in an efficient manner. Ask questions!!

TAKE ACTION! Experiment—Test the items for biodegradability before you purchase a large quantity of service-ware or commit to a contract! Ask your product provider to give you some samples and set up an experiment in your school’s backyard composter (if you do not have a school composter, run the experiment at home). Design your own experiment, or simply take 3-4 items: one as a control (not exposed to soil, water, light), one to be placed in a composter and left undisturbed, one to be placed in a composter that is kept moist and is turned regularly. Allow 1-3 months for this experiment for best results.

Step 2: Defining biodegradable: is this service-ware able to turn into soil?

“Biodegradable” vs. “Compostable” what do they mean?

- Composting and biodegradation are not identical, but industry uses the terms interchangeably. Be careful, not all biodegradable products are compostable and some require a specific environment to biodegrade not found in composting facilities!

Biodegradation is...

Compostable is...

TAKE ACTION! Ask Questions: Ask your product provider if the product you wish to use is biodegradable or compostable. Ask them to define the product in terms of days to complete compostability.

Step 3: What types of biodegradable products are available to your school?

There are two main types of biodegradable plastics used in service-ware: hydro-biodegradable plastics (HBP – need water/hydrolysis to degrade) and oxo-biodegradable plastics (OBP – need oxygen/oxidation to degrade).

What types are available to your school?

ASTM standards explained

American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) has created standards ASTM D6400 that test for compostability. This requires that products that are sent to a municipal or industrial composting facility do not degrade the quality of the compost created. (www.astm.org/Standards/D6400.htm)

TAKE ACTION! Find out if the products available to your school have ASTM certification. If they don't, ask why not!

Step 4: What is the best way forward?

After completing the worksheet, review your answers and decide with your EcoTeam the best way forward to reduce waste at your school. Record your discussion below:

If your research has led you to the conclusion that biodegradable service-ware is not suitable for your school's waste minimization plan, here are some alternatives:

- Organize your EcoTeam and school to get reusable china for your cafeteria.
- Gather a class set of reusable service-ware for class parties, club celebrations, etc. Let teachers know they can 'sign out' the class set for their events.
- Encourage students to bring their own reusable service-ware to use at your cafeteria (plastic containers, plates, cutlery, bowls).
- Ask parents and visitors to the school to 'Lug-a-mug' to school events such as curriculum night, sports events, holiday gatherings, fundraisers, etc.
- Waste free food: commit to buy food that has its own packaging (bananas, oranges, watermelon...).