

Compostable definition

A product that is “compostable” is one that can be placed into a composition of decaying biodegradable materials, and eventually turns into a nutrient-rich material. It is almost synonymous with “biodegradable”, except it is limited to solid materials and does not refer to liquids.

Composting occurs in nature every day as fallen leaves and tree limbs biodegrade into the forest floor. The EPA considers composting a form of recycling because it turns resources into a usable product.

Compost piles have been used by many farmers and gardeners for generations. Food, leaves, grass clippings, garden wastes, and tree trimmings (which amount to between 50 and 70 percent of waste in this country) can all go into the compost pile, where hungry microorganisms eat the waste to produce carbon dioxide, water and humus. The resulting compost is an excellent natural fertilizer proven by organic gardeners to restore soil fertility, control weeds, retain ground moisture and reduce soil erosion.

While backyard compost piles are well known, the newest application of composting is municipal composting, which works on the same natural principles, but is done on a much larger scale. In the USA, over 2,200 communities already compost their leaves, grass and yard trimmings. Approximately 55 additional communities compost or are about to compost all their organic trash at well-sited, professionally managed composting facilities.

Municipal composting requires minimal time, effort and labour, since most of the work is done by the microorganisms. Communities can also use or sell the resulting compost for agricultural and horticultural uses, or to restore depleted lands. Unlike landfills, a composting site can be continually reused without ever reaching capacity.

As with the term biodegradable, regulators recommend that the term compostable not be used unless the product is currently composted in a significant amount in the area where it is sold. Without the ability to actually compost the product, claim is considered to be meaningless and thus deceptive. They recommend that any

product promoted as “compostable” should clearly and prominently disclose that the product is not designed to degrade in landfills.

There are no federal regulations regarding the use of the term “compostable”, but the U S Federal Trade Commission does give guidelines.

They say, “An unqualified claim that a product or package is compostable should be substantiated by competent and reliable scientific evidence that all the materials in the product or package will break down into, or otherwise become part of, usable compost (e.g., soil conditioning material, mulch) in a safe and timely manner in an appropriate composting program or facility, or in a home compost pile or device.”

Claims may be considered deceptive if: (1) municipal composting facilities are not available to a substantial majority of consumers or communities where the package is sold; (2) the claim misleads consumers about the environmental benefit provided when the product is disposed of in a landfill, or (3) consumers misunderstand the claim to mean that the package can be safely composted in their home compost pile or device when, in fact, it cannot.