

Composting at HSPH FAQs



HSPH is starting a NEW post-consumer compost program in Sebastian's Café!

Questions? Contact greenideas@hsph.harvard.edu

1. How does this change the way I dispose of waste?

You will now be sorting your waste into one of THREE disposal containers:

- **COMPOST (green bin):** all food waste and bio-degradable service-ware (see below for details)
- **CO-MINGLED RECYCLING (blue bin):** all plastic (#1-7), glass, and metal containers
- **TRASH (brown bin):** any other materials that can't be COMPOSTED or RECYCLED

2. What CAN be composted?

- ALL food waste (including grains, breads, meat, dairy, fruits, vegetables, tea bags, and coffee grinds),
- napkins,
- paper towels,
- compostable cutlery from Sebastian's (NEW),
- compostable plates from Sebastian's (NEW),
- compostable cups from Sebastian's (NEW),
- compostable take-out containers from Sebastian's (NEW)
- compostable straws and straw wrappers from Sebastian's (NEW)
- wooden coffee stirrers



3. What CANNOT be composted?

- **coffee lids,**
- **sugar packets** (these are lined with plastic coating)
- plastic ketchup or similar dressing and sauce packets,
- styrofoam,
- paper coffee cups not from Sebastian's (most coffee cups are lined with plastic),
- paper plates (most paper plates are lined with plastic)
- plastic and metal
- tissues

4. What do you mean by new “Compostable Containers”?

As part of this new program, Sebastian's will be switching all disposable service-ware to **BIODEGRADABLE** products that can be composted.

These products (including plates, cups, silverware, take-out clamshells) are made from renewable resources and will **bio-degrade** in the proper environment (meaning the material will break down into natural components). The products are made from corn-based plastics and molded fibers such as sugarcane, grasses, etc.

The corn-based plastic known as “PLA” (poly-lactic acid) not only breaks down in a compost facility, but also uses 65% less energy during production, compared to traditional plastic.

Note—these new coffee cups and takeout containers are not intended to be used in the microwave, and do not hold up as well when heated.

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5. Why is it so important that the compost is not contaminated with ANY NON– BIODEGRADABLE waste?

If non-biodegradable waste is mixed with the organic waste, the compost facility may refuse to take our organic waste, and we will have to stop the post-consumer composting program.

*****When in doubt, throw it out! (as TRASH)*****

6. How can I tell if a cup or plate is biodegradable?

First of all, any cups, plates or serviceware from Sebastian's is made from a renewable resource and can be composted, (EXCEPT FOR the lids to the coffee cups and soup cups!) You can also check the bottom of plastic cups, those that are made from bio-degradable plastic usually say "PLA" (which stands for poly-lactic acid), and/or "COMPOSTABLE" on the bottom. Any

If you bring in a cup, plate, etc. from an outside vendor, it most likely is NOT bio-degradable and should be placed in the WASTE bin (even paper coffee cups and paper plates usually have a plastic lining, and are not compostable).

7. Where does the organic waste go?

The organic waste is picked up and brought to a local compost facility on the North Shore. The compost is brought to higher temperatures than home compost bins, which breaks down the waste in less than 10 months.

8. Why should we compost?

1. Composting breaks our waste down to a usable form of incredibly valuable all natural fertilizer; trash sits in a landfill and does not break down or is incinerated.
2. Biodegradable material in a landfill breaks down anaerobically to form methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Composting lets waste break down naturally, releasing only CO₂ a less potent greenhouse gas and part of the natural biodegradation cycle.
3. Producing PLA (plant-derived plastics) uses 65% less energy than petroleum based plastics, reducing the greenhouse gas footprint of the product.

9. I am concerned about using a food source, such as corn, as packaging when there are so many global food shortages.

This is an incredibly complicated issue, and we don't have an easy answer, but agree that this is a serious problem and should be addressed at all levels. For now we feel the positive waste reduction and greenhouse gas emissions reduction benefits outweigh the negatives from use of these biodegradable products, but will continue to learn about this issue and will consider all impacts of our choices for future decisions.

It is also important to note that the corn used to make these products is low grade corn grown for animal feed, and would be not be exported for human consumption.