

The need to reduce contamination in organics recycling

In order for organics recycling programs to be sustainable, the compost sites that turn organics into compost must receive organics with very low levels of non-compostable materials, or contamination.

Disruptions at the compost sites that serve the metro area due to COVID-19 has made reducing contamination even more important. Challenges related to COVID-19 have reduced processing capacity at the compost sites, restricted their ability to remove contamination, and made it more difficult for them to meet quality standards and sell their finished product.

Reducing contamination helps ensure the viability of organics recycling programs

Organics need to be free of non-compostable materials

Organic materials collected at businesses, schools, multifamily properties, homes, and drop-off sites are delivered to commercial composting facilities. There, the materials are mixed with yard waste and processed to become compost, a nutrient-rich soil amendment. Compost is sold for use in landscaping, road construction, and garden projects.

Receiving organics free of contamination allows local composters to consistently produce clean, nutrient-rich compost that people want to purchase and use.

Compost that contains plastic, glass, and other contaminants is very difficult to sell and can only be used for low-end purposes.

Composters have tightened their contamination requirements

The commercial composting facilities that serve the Twin Cities metro area have reduced the amount of contamination they can accept at their facilities – contamination is anything that isn't compostable, such as plastic and glass.

Changes in their operations due to COVID-19 led to the stricter requirements. Typically, staff at the compost facilities do some manual sorting of the organics when they are delivered to remove contaminants. Due to COVID-19, staff at the compost sites are no longer manually sorting the organics, meaning more contamination is getting into the composting process and ending up in their finished compost.

Know what goes in the organics recycling

The best thing you can do to support organics recycling is to make sure you know what can be composted and keep out stuff that isn't accepted. If you aren't sure what to do with an item, refer to your organics recycling guide or put it in the trash bin.

Accepted

All food



Food waste is the most valuable material in the organics recycling for composting.

All food is accepted, including fruits and vegetables; dairy products; meat, fish and bones; pasta, beans and rice; bread and cereal; and nuts and shells.

Napkins and paper towels



Certified compostable products

Include certified compostable plastic and paper cups, plates, bowls, utensils, and containers.



Look for the BPI logo on certified compostable products, or check to see if a product meets BPI standards for compostability at bpiworld.org. When purchasing products, be sure to ask if what you are buying is certified compostable.

Other compostable items



Coffee grounds and filters, houseplants and cut flowers, wooden items such as chopsticks, popsicle sticks and toothpicks, and pizza boxes from delivery are also accepted.

Not accepted

Some of the most important items to keep out of the organics recycling because they cause the biggest contamination issues are:

- Glass
- Plastic items, including food stickers, utensils, Styrofoam™
- Plastic-coated paper items like coffee and soda cups
- Fast food wrappers and condiment packets
- Uncertified to-go containers and not certified compostable products labeled "biodegradable"
- Diapers, sanitary products, and cleaning wipes
- Grease or oil



What contributes to contamination

Higher levels of contamination tend to happen in the following situations:

- Collecting organics in front-of-house areas. The county discourages front-of-house collection of organics unless all items are reusable or compostable. Customers and the general public often find it confusing or don't take the time to properly sort food and foodservice packaging.
- Items are available that are not compostable or reusable in employee common areas. For example, items like plastic utensils, individual creamers, and individual coffee packets in breakrooms.
- Enthusiasm and involvement from champions and leaders fade after the program launch. Without continual support, the quality of an organics program can slip.
- Training and reminders are infrequent. When employees are not aware of their recycling options or are not motivated to care about sorting their waste, it can cause waste to be sorted improperly.

What you can do to reduce contamination

Take the following steps to ensure that the organics recycling collected at your business, organization, or school is clean and free of contamination.



Simplify your waste stream

Simplify your waste stream by using only reusable or compostable items. For in-house dining, it is best to use reusable dishes, cups, and utensils. If you are using compostable products, make sure that all of your serving containers, dishes, utensils, cups, and containers are BPI certified compostable so that all waste can go in the organics recycling container.

Assess all items available

Assess all of the items in common areas and breakrooms for staff and make sure they are reusable or compostable. As much as possible, eliminate things like non-compostable plastic utensils, plastic straws, stir sticks and individual coffee creamers. Offer things like cream and sugar in bulk. A list of certified compostable vendors is available at hennepin.us/businessorganics.

Simplify what you collect or where you collect it

If you continue to notice contamination issues, consider simplifying what you collect or where you collect it. Food is the most valuable material to collect for organics recycling, so you could switch to collecting food waste only in situations where you have contamination issues. You could also stop collecting organics in challenging areas. Because of contamination problems, the county discourages the collection of organics in public facing areas.

Make regular training mandatory

Make regular training on waste sorting mandatory. Offer regular training to cleaning and janitorial staff on how to properly sort waste and use the correct dumpster or compactor for each waste stream. Offer training when onboarding new staff, and require current staff to be trained twice per year.

Place clearly labeled bins together

Place bins for recycling, trash, and organics recycling together. Make sure waste bins are labeled, that labels are placed properly so they are visible to the users, and that waste bins are lined up with any signage hung on the walls.

Control access to dumpsters

Depending on the location of your dumpsters, consider controlling access to prevent unwanted dumping.

Contact us

Contact us if you have questions or need resources to modify your organics recycling program.

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