

Know what to throw: Organics recycling activity

Background information

Many people think they know everything that can be put into an organics recycling bin, but are surprised to learn that some items have been added to organics recycling programs while other items are a problem in the composting process. Sorting through compostable and non-compostable materials is a simple, fun and eye-opening way to engage people in learning more about organics recycling.

Outcomes

Participants will learn what can and can't be put into organics recycling bins.

Concepts

- Many things can be composted in organics recycling programs. Some additional materials are now accepted in organics recycling programs and others have been removed from the accepted list. The basic list of what items are accepted for organics recycling is consistent throughout Hennepin County and the metro area. Some materials cannot be accepted in organics recycling programs because they will not break down properly in the large-scale composting operations.
- Recycling organics for compost conserves energy and natural resources and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

Audience

Youth (ages 5+), parents and children

Time

20 – 30 minutes

Supplies

- Multiple examples of the following items:
 - Organics recycling: all food, non-recyclable paper like napkins, paper towels and tissues, certified compostable products and other compostable household items such as coffee grounds and filters. Plastic food toys or pictures of food can be used to represent food that easily spoils; nuts, pasta, grains are good items to use that don't spoil as easily. Pictures of food are also great when working on a limited budget or timeline. Refer to the "additional activities" section for an option to make your kit reflect waste composition in Hennepin County.
 - Recyclables: office paper, newspaper, magazines, phone books, cereal, cracker or pasta boxes, cardboard rolls from toilet paper/paper towels, plastic bottles, plastic cups, plastic containers, metal food cans, pop cans, glass bottles and jars, and cartons.
 - Trash: food/candy wrappers, gift wrap, frozen food boxes, broken toys, Styrofoam™ cups, to-go food boxes, microwave meal trays, to-go coffee cups, items labeled as "biodegradable"
- Containers for sorting recyclables. Boxes, bins, bags or laundry baskets work well.
- Coloring materials (crayons, colored pencils, etc.)
- Handout: Organics Recycling Guide
- Handout: Recycling Guide (optional)

Preparation

- Collect and clean common items that can and cannot be put into organics recycling programs (see a list under supplies, and get more ideas from the Organics Recycling Guide.)
- Put example items from the trash, recycling and organics into a container that can be used as a sorting kit.
- Create as many sorting kits as you need. It's ideal to work in groups of about five. See additional activity ideas for variations for larger groups.
- Make sure that each sorting kit has the same general types of recyclable, organics and trash items and is of similar difficulty.

Procedure

- Split your audience into groups of about five participants each. Distribute the sorting kits: one to each group.
- Have the groups work on sorting the materials into trash, recycling and organics items, focusing on what you can put into organics recycling bins. You can provide organics and recycling guides or signs to help people determine what goes where. There are many different ways to make this activity engaging for your audience. You can set it up as a game show, timed race, team-building activity or other sort of contest. See additional activity ideas for more details on these additional options.
- As a large group, go through a sorting kit explaining what materials should be put in the organics recycling bin. Encourage participants to ask questions and discuss options. If you're unsure about something, follow up with Hennepin County at environment@hennepin.us to get an answer.
- Some items aren't accepted in organics recycling bins because they cause problems in the composting process. For example, food containers and utensils that are not certified by BPI or Cedar Grove (see guide for logos) but are labeled biodegradable are not accepted in organics programs.
- Learn how to dispose of specific items with the Green Disposal Guide at www.hennepin.us/greendisposalguide.

Discussion questions

- What did you learn that was new? What items can you put in an organics recycling bin that you didn't realize were accepted before this activity?
- Were there any materials that you thought you could go into organics recycling bins that are actually not accepted? Since these materials generally go in the trash, are there ways you could avoid using them in the first place?
- Are there any materials you are confused about?
- Why are organics composting programs important?
- Why do you think some people decide not to do organics recycling? What would help them start?
- What did you learn that you want to share with someone else? Who will you share it with?
- How can you incorporate what you learned to set up an organics recycling system in your home? What would a home system look like?
- What do you want to learn more about?

Additional activity ideas

Waste composition sort

When gathering materials for the sorting activity consider having the quantities of trash, recycling, and organics reflect the composition of materials disposed of in the trash in Hennepin County. Use the following percentages to help you figure out how many of each type of item (trash, recycling, organics) you should include in your kit.

- 55% Recyclables
- 20% Food waste (use real food, plastic food, or images of food)
- 10% Compostable materials (paper towels, napkins, certified compostable products)
- 15% Trash

If you have a kit with 50 items that would mean you should have this composition: 28 recyclable items, 10 food waste items, 5 compostable material items, 8 trash items.

Relay race

Teams can use a relay race to fuel friendly competition. Have teams race to see who can sort the items correctly the fastest. Assign a time penalty for each incorrect item.

Circle up

Have participants stand in a circle and give one item to each person. Go around the circle and have each participant say whether they think their item is trash, recycling or organics. Discuss with the group the correct answer and ways to reduce waste in the home.

Team-building

Have participants work together to create a project from the items that end up in the trash category after the waste sort. Examples include creating the tallest structure, a model that represents something else or forming a band that plays instruments made from non-recyclable materials.

Waste audit

Examining what materials are being put in the trash or recycling is an eye-opening way to understand your recycling system and identify opportunities to improve.

- Put on protective gear such as rubber gloves and take a look in your trash, organics and recycling bins. Note what kinds of recyclables are in there and calculate the percentage of trash that could be recycled. Use this information to improve recycling within your household or your group's facility.
- For example, place signs on organics bins of all the items that are accepted and place reminders on the trash bin to only throw away things that are truly garbage. If you're doing a waste audit at home, ask participants to take a look at what is going in the trash versus what is getting recycled in different areas of their homes, including the kitchen, office, bathroom and laundry room.
- As a group, discuss what opportunities there are to recycle organics more. Order labels for participants to put on their trash and recycling bins at home at hennepin.us/recycleeverywhere.

Resources

Handouts

- Organics recycling guide (available in English or translated in Hmong, Lao, Oromo, Spanish, Somali, and Swahili)
- Recycling guide (available in English or translated in Cambodian Khmer, Hmong, Lao, Russian, Spanish, Somali, Thai and Vietnamese)

Stickers for household waste containers

- Order at www.hennepin.us/recycleeverywhere

Education kits and activities

- **Recycling sorting activity:** includes three color-coded and labeled bins (trash, recycling, and organics) and items you can or cannot recycle or compost in an organics program. A guide is attached to each bag with the answer key.
- **Organics education kit:** this kit includes information on curbside organics programs and several activities.

Know what to throw: answer key

Item	Organics	Recycle	Trash
Plastic food items (representing real food)	X		
Take-out pizza box	X		
Wine cork	X		
"Prime" soup cup	X		
To-go coffee cup (Sustainable earth by Staples)	X		
To-go coffee cup lid (World- Centric)	X		
Styrofoam cup (green painting and bird)			X
Brown cardboard to-go box			
White paper to-go box	X		
Clear plastic to-go box (ECO Products)	X		
Paper plates (SOLO)	X		
Clear cup with green band (World Centric)	X		
Plastic headphone packaging		X	
Napkins/paper towels	X		

Contacts

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But what if I'm wrong? Organics recycling activity

Background information

Many people are afraid that they will make a mistake and put the wrong items into their organics recycling bins. This activity will work through the tricky items, discuss what bin they should be put in, and help reassure participants about what is accepted. Participants will be reassured that while these items do exist, food waste alone makes up about 20% of waste and disposing of only food waste in an organics bin is making a significant difference.

Outcomes

Participants will be comfortable sorting waste for organics recycling. Participants will also be reassured that if they only put food waste into organics recycling containers they are still making a large impact.

Concepts

- There are two types of certifications that show people which items will break down properly at a composting facility. These are the BPI and Cedar Grove logos. The term "compostable" also means that items can go in the organics bin.
- There are numerous unregulated words that do not mean items are compostable. These include words like "biodegradable" and "made from plants."
- If in doubt, a large impact can be made by putting all food waste into the organics bin and disposing of the rest as trash

Audience

Adults, youth (ages 13+)

Time

20-30 minutes

Supplies

- Examples of confusing items: to-go coffee cups and covers, items labeled "biodegradable," pizza boxes, to-go food boxes, clear beverage cups, straws, disposable flatware, microwave popcorn bags, dryer lint, and wax paper
 - If possible: track down a "trash" and an "organics" version of each item

Preparation

Collect and clean common items that can and cannot be put into organics for composting programs (see a list under supplies, and get more ideas from the Organics Recycling Guide.)

Procedure

- Talk with your audience about organics items and how there are some tricky items when it comes to choosing which disposal option (trash, recycling, organics) is the correct one. Be sure to reassure participants and explain that while these items do exist, food waste alone makes up about 20% of waste. So, disposing of only food waste in an organics bin is making a significant difference. Being unsure about these tricky items is okay. The main take-away once this activity is complete is that participants know how to differentiate items, and "if in doubt, put only food waste in the organics bin."
- Split your audience into groups of about five participants each. Distribute 2-3 items to each group.
- Have the groups work together to decide which of their items can be put in organics bins and which cannot. You can provide organics guides or signs to help people determine what goes where. There are many different ways to make this activity engaging for your audience. You can set it up as a relay race, team-building activity or other sort of contest. See additional activity ideas for more details on these additional options.

- As a large group, go through the items explaining what materials should be put in the organics bin. Encourage participants to ask questions and discuss options. If you're unsure about something, follow up with Hennepin County at environment@hennepin.us to get an answer.
- Using the organics recycling guides, discuss the certifications items can have that show they should go in the organics bins.
- Some items aren't accepted in organics for composting bins because they cause problems in the composting process. Items that are not certified by BPI or Cedar Grove (see guide for logos) but are labeled biodegradable are not accepted in organics programs.
- Learn how to dispose of specific items with the Green Disposal Guide at www.hennepin.us/greendisposalguide.

Discussion questions

- What did you learn that was new? What items can you put in an organics bin that you didn't realize were accepted before this activity?
- Were there any materials that you thought you could go into organics bins that are actually not accepted? Since these items need to go in the trash, what could you do to avoid using them in the first place?
- Are there any materials you are confused about?
- Why are organics composting programs important?
- Why do you think some people decide not to do organics recycling? What would help them start?
- What did you learn that you want to share with someone else? Who will you share it with?
- How can you incorporate what you learned to set up an organics recycling system in your home? What would a home system look like?
- What do you want to learn more about?

Additional activity ideas

Game show

Have participants form groups of 2-3. Blindfold one participant per group. The blindfolded person will then ask questions about the "mystery" item that their group-mates are holding. For instance: "is it food?" "does it say 'compostable?'" etc. Once the blindfolded person feels comfortable with what bin the item should go in, another group-member can be blindfolded. Repeat this activity until all items have been sorted through or until you feel the group has a good handle on what to look for when deciding which bin an item should go in.

Relay race

Teams can use a relay race to fuel friendly competition. Have teams race to see who can sort the items correctly the fastest. Assign a time penalty for each incorrect item.

Team-building

Have participants work together to create a project from the items that end up in the trash category after the waste sort. Examples include creating the tallest structure, a model that represents something else or forming a band that plays instruments made from non-recyclable materials.

Circle up

Have participants stand in a circle and give one item to each person. Go around the circle and have each participant say whether they think their item is accepted in organics recycling or not. Discuss with the group the correct answer and ways to reduce waste in the home.

Resources

Handouts

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Education kits and activities

- **Recycling sorting activity:** includes three color-coded and labeled bins (trash, recycling, and organics) and items you can or cannot recycle or compost in an organics program. A guide is attached to each bag with the answer key.
- **Organics learning kit:** this kit includes information on curbside organics programs and several activities.

But what if I'm wrong? Answer key

Item	Organics	Recycle	Trash
Plastic food items (representing real food)	X		
Caribou coffee cup			X
Caribou coffee lid (brown)			X
Caribou coffee heat sleeve		X	
Dunn Brothers coffee cup with attached sleeve			X
Dunn Brothers coffee cover (black)			X
Square Solo brand white paper plate	X		
Amy's frozen food box			X
Cardboard cup (brown 4oz)	X		
Cardboard cup lid (4oz clear)		X	
Cardboard cup (brown 2oz)	X		
Cardboard cup lid (2oz clear)		X	
Soda cup: McDonalds			X
Microwave popcorn bag			X
Wax paper			X
Mini spoon: orange			X
Candy wrappers: orange Explanation: they say to put them in compost, but those words are not regulated. This probably wouldn't break down correctly in large-scale composting and would serve as a contaminant.			X
Green spoon: flat tip like a shovel Explanation: This does not say "compostable" or have the Cedar Grove or Bpi logos anywhere on it			X
Green spoon: rounded end Explanation: look closely, there is a small BPI logo	X		
Green fork Explanation: look closely, there is a small BPI logo	X		
Green square plate Explanation: look closely, there is a small BPI logo	X		

Item	Organics	Recycle	Trash
Green martini cup base Explanation: look closely, there is a small BPI logo	X		
Clear martini cup top Explanation: look closely, there is a small BPI logo	X		
Wine corks: black dot on end Explanation: look closely, this is not real cork			X
Wine corks: black "X" on end Explanation: look closely, this is real cork	X		
Paper plate, Dixie Brand Explanation: this is plastic-coated paper and will not break down properly at a compost facility.			X
Paper bowl, Dixie Brand Explanation: this is plastic-coated paper and will not break down properly at a compost facility.			X
Paper bowl, square, Solo brand	X		
To-go cup, clear, earth choice brand	X		
To-go cup lid, clear, ingeo brand	X		
To-go beverage cup, clear, GreenWare brand Explanation: does not say "compostable" or contain logos from BPI or Cedar Grove			X
To-go beverage cup, clear 9oz, EcoProducts brand Explanation: does not say "compostable" or contain logos from BPI or Cedar Grove	X		
Clear 4oz cup		X	
Clear 4oz cup lid (ASL4/5)		X	
Clear 3.25oz cup, Greenware Explanation: does not say "compostable" or contain logos from BPI or Cedar Grove			X
Clear deli tub, EcoProducts brand	X		
Clear lid for deli tub, EcoProducts brand	X		
Clear large lid for to-go bowl, no brand		X	
Clear large lid for to-go bowl, EcoProducts brand		X	
Cutlery, Wendy's spoon, fork, knife			X
Cutlery, fork, knife, World Centric brand	X		
Cutlery, knives, Eco-products "made from plants" Explanation: does not say "compostable" or contain logos from BPI or Cedar Grove			X