

# Compostable Products for Food Services

Making Sense of What's Available



**ECO-CYCLE**

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## Price points

- Many of the compostable products made from corn, etc. have been price competitive with their paper counterparts for several years. In larger quantities (such as amounts that school districts order), though, this is not always the case and may be a bit more unpredictable. On any price comparisons to Styrofoam® (polystyrene) clamshells and cutlery, however, compostables are not price competitive.
- When oil prices were rising in 2005, plastic products were becoming more expensive. As compostables became “mainstream” that helped to make some compostables price-competitive with traditional disposables.
- Six years later, as oil prices are rising again, this helps pricing when compared to oil-based plastics. However, this may be offset because corn is also selling at higher prices, so that will affect compostables prices as well.
- Many factors will affect these products’ prices: distribution, quantity ordered, etc.

## Products available

- A wide variety of products are now available for foodservice and on-the-go situations. Almost every type of disposable product has a compostable alternative.
- Items available include:
  - **Cups:** hot cups, cold cups, lids
    - Drink related:** straws, sleeves for hot cups, cup carriers
  - **Bowls:** various sized serving bowls, bowls with lids for transport of to-go soup, etc.
  - **Plates:** various sized plates, compartmental plates
  - **Trays:** various sized trays, compartmental trays
  - **Bags:** various sizes used for compost collection
  - **Hinged containers:** fiber-based “take out” containers, compartmental containers, clear-PLA burger boxes/clamshells
  - **Oven-containers:** designed to heat food & then serve (such as for muffins, pastries, etc.), fiber-based (bagasse or paper)
  - **Deli containers:** clear with lids of various size from portion size to large
  - **Cutlery:** forks, spoons, knives, sporks
  - **Miscellaneous:** serving gloves, bags, film, baking sheet liners, aprons
- Materials are made from:
  - **PLA** – polylactic acid (corn-based), two main uses: lining in cups, plates, etc. and used to make cold cups, etc.

**bagasse** – fibrous material byproduct left after sugar-cane (and sometimes sorghum) stalks are squeezed to extract their juice. When made into plates, bowls, cups, etc. bagasse looks similar to paper.

**wheat straw**

- **paper**

**corn starch** – caution, avoid corn & plant starch products that are combined with oil-based resins (usually cutlery, but some packaging)

- **Also soy, tapioca, potato starch** – but less common

- **palm fiber**

- **wood**

### **Performance: Do compostables work as well as disposables?**

- Performance issues have been concerns in the past, but over the last several years compostable food service products stand up to perform just as well as their disposable counterparts.
- Past issues have included the heat resistance of cups, cutlery, etc., but manufacturers will verify what temperatures and uses their products will withstand (such as oven-proof, microwave-proof, etc.)
- Make sure to pay attention to the product's purpose/function to make sure it will meet the needs. Ask about how heat, refrigeration, etc. will affect a product's performance.
- If you are concerned about an item's performance, request samples. Most companies will offer samples to address concerns about appearance and performance.
- Pay attention to storage instructions because improper storage will affect performance. Some products don't perform well if stored in hot or moist environments.

### **Cutlery**

- There has been some press about plant-starch cutlery not being fully compostable. Like all other products, they need to be BPI certified. Two companies that sell cutlery have strived to clarify this information on their websites, Eco-Products & Bio-Centric.

- When looking for cutlery, avoid “plant starch” or “corn starch” cutlery, because this cutlery is not certified compostable. It is combined with an oil-based resin to make it stronger.
- Most of the BPI certified cutlery is PLA. There is also wood-based cutlery available, but in appearance would not be mistaken for PLA or plastic.

## Appearance

- Most companies and manufacturers will offer special logo and printing options for their compostable products.
- Molded paper products (similar in form to paper egg cartons) and other paper/fiber products give a variety of options in terms of strength and look.
- PLA products (the clear “plastic”) can be ordered with special labeling to designate compostability.

## BPI certification/ordering

- When inquiring about compostable products, make sure you are asking about BPI certified items. Many of the companies that offer BPI certified products also offer a variety of “disposable” products that may be similar in appearance and function.
- The companies listed on BPI’s website make a point of designating and advertising their compostable products on their own websites, making them fairly easy to find. Many of the compostable products may be advertised under a particular line or brand of products, not necessarily the company’s name. These brands are listed in the table/handout.

## History

- Compostable products have come a long way in the last few years. Many of these companies have begun manufacturing compostable products or expanded their lines of products in the **last five or six years** to meet new demands.

## Contact us

Cyndra Dietz, 303.444.6634 x 122, [cld@ecocycle.org](mailto:cld@ecocycle.org)